

*CHRIST'S DESCENT INTO LIMBO* AT THE BRISTOL CITY ART  
GALLERY AND MUSEUM: A SINGULAR WORK OF ART

by

HAZEL WESTON

A thesis submitted to  
The University of Birmingham  
For the degree of  
MPHIL (B)

Department of History of Art  
College of Arts and Law  
The University of Birmingham  
September 2009

UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

**University of Birmingham Research Archive**

**e-theses repository**

This unpublished thesis/dissertation is copyright of the author and/or third parties. The intellectual property rights of the author or third parties in respect of this work are as defined by The Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988 or as modified by any successor legislation.

Any use made of information contained in this thesis/dissertation must be in accordance with that legislation and must be properly acknowledged. Further distribution or reproduction in any format is prohibited without the permission of the copyright holder.

## Contents

	Page no.
Acknowledgements	2
List of Illustrations	3
Introduction: Condition of the Bristol Painting, Subject and Related Images	8
Chapter One: Problematic Accounts	14
Chapter Two: An Altered Interpretation	29
Chapter Three: A Work of an Accomplished Master	48
Conclusion: Artistic Process and a Possible Patron	69
Bibliography	72
Illustrations	77
Appendix	103-108

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum for permitting me access to their curatorial and conservation files on *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, for allowing use of the unpublished documents they own, and permission to take photographs of the painting. I am very grateful to Carolyn Lamb (fine art conservator at the Bristol Gallery) who provided me with infra-red photographs and x-rays of the painting as well as giving her professional opinion on the condition of the work. Professor David Parker from the Theology Department of the University of Birmingham and Professor Keith Elliott, of the Theology at the University of Leeds, kindly assisted my study into the theology of the subject. Sincere thanks also go to Kay Sutton (Director of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts at Christie's) who provided invaluable information for my research. Finally, I am indebted to my supervisor David Hemsoll in the History of Art Department at the University of Birmingham.

## List of Illustrations

1. *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, oil with some resin on vellum stuck onto panel, 518 x 373mm, Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum
2. Andrea Mantegna (1430/1-1506), *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, engraving, 440 x 353mm (sheet); 445 x 346mm (plate), late-1460s to early-1480s, National Gallery of Art, Washington
3. *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, pen and brown ink with brown wash on vellum, 372 x 280mm, Bibliothèque Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris
4. Andrea Mantegna (1430/1-1506), *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, tempera and gold on panel, 388 x 423mm, c.1492, Barbara Piasecka Johnson Collection, New Jersey
5. Andrea Mantegna (1430/1-1506), *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, pen and brown ink with brown wash on paper, 270 x 200mm, c.1492, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Robert Lehman Collection
6. *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum, x-ray photograph taken in 1987
7. Andrea Mantegna (1430/1-1506), *Christ's Descent into Limbo* (detail), engraving, National Gallery of Art, Washington
8. Line drawing of detail from Andrea Mantegna's *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, engraving
9. *Christ's Descent into Limbo* (detail), Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum
10. Line drawing of detail from *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum
11. Giotto di Bondone (1267-1337), *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, tempera on wood, 450 x 444mm, 1320-5, Alte Pinakothek, Munich
12. Fra Angelico (c.1387-1455), *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, fresco, 1442, 183 x 166cm, cell 31, Museo di San Marco dell'Angelico, Florence
13. Jacopo Bellini (c.1400-c.1470), *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, predella of the *Gattamelata Altarpiece*, tempera on panel, 285 x 580mm, c.1459/60 Museo Civico, Padua

14. Jacopo Bellini (c.1400-c.1470), *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, silverpoint on grey chalk ground on vellum, 422 x 283mm, c.1430-60, sheet 22v of the Musée du Louvre Book, Paris
15. Jacopo Bellini (c.1400-c.1470), *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, leadpoint on paper, 413 x 335mm, c.1455-65, sheet 26 of the British Museum Book, London
16. Duccio di Buoninsegna (c.1255-1319), *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, tempera on wood, 510 x 535mm, 1308-11, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Siena
17. Master of the Osservanza (active c.1436), *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, tempera on panel, 343 x 432mm, c.1440-44, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University
18. Andrea di Bonaiuto (active 1443-77), *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, fresco, 1366-88, Spanish Chapel, Santa Maria Novella, Florence
19. Pietro Lorenzetti (c.1280-1348), *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, fresco, c. 1320, south transept of the Lower Church, San Francesco Assisi
20. Giovanni da Rimini (active 1292-1309), *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, tempera on panel, c.1305, one panel of a diptych, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome
21. Giusto de Menabuoi (c.1320-1391), *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, fresco, 1376-8, Baptistery, Cathedral, Padua
22. Veneto-Byzantine School, *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, mosaic, thirteenth-century, Basilica di San Marco, Venice
23. Donatello (c.1386-1466), *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, bronze relief, 1460-5, North Pulpit, Church of San Lorenzo, Florence
24. Andrea Mantegna (1430/1-1506), *Death of the Virgin*, tempera on panel, 540 x 420mm, c.1460, Museo del Prado, Madrid
25. Andrea Mantegna (1430/1-1506), *St James Preaching*, (now destroyed) fresco, c.1450, formerly Cappella Ovetari, Eremitani Chapel, Padua
26. Martin Schongauer (c.1448-1491), *Nativity*, engraving, 257 x 171mm, c.1470-5, National Gallery of Art, Washington
27. Andrea Mantegna (1430/1-1506), *St Sebastian*, canvas, 255 x 140 cm, c.1480, Musée du Louvre, Paris
28. *Temptation of Adam and Eve*, stone sculpture relief, fourteenth-century, west corner, Palazzo Ducale, Venice
29. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *Christ Crowned with Thorns*, 103 x 64 cm, c.1490, Nationalmuseum, Stockholm

30. Giulio Campagnola (c.1482-c.1515-18), *The Young Shepherd*, engraving, 134 x 78 mm, c.1510
31. Giulio Campagnola (c.1482-c.1515-18), *Landscape with Two Men Sitting near a Coppice*, pen and brown ink, 134mm x 259mm, after 1510, Musée du Louvre, Paris
32. Giulio Campagnola (c.1482-c.1515-18), *The Rape of Ganymede*, engraving, 169 x 120mm, 1500–1505, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
33. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *Blood of the Redeemer*, tempera on poplar, 470 x 343mm, c.1460-5, National Gallery, London
34. *Christ's Descent into Limbo* (detail), Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum, infra-red photograph taken in 1987
35. *Christ's Descent into Limbo* (detail), Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum, infra-red photograph taken in 1987
36. Andrea Mantegna (1430/1-1506), *The Presentation of the Christ Child in the Temple*, distemper on wood, 670 x 860mm, c.1454, Staatlich Museum, Berlin
37. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *The Presentation of the Christ Child in the Temple*, tempera on wood, 800 x 105mm, late 1460s, Pinacoteca Querini Stampalia, Venice
38. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *Resurrection*, oil on panel transferred to canvas, 1480 x 1280mm, 1475-79, Staatliche Museen, Berlin
39. Andrea Mantegna (1430/1-1506), *Deposition*, engraving, 452 x 362mm, c.1465, The British Museum, London
40. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *St Sebastian* from the *Polyptych of St Vincent Ferrer*, tempera on panel, 1670 x 670mm, c.1460-5, Basilica dei Santi Giovanni e Paolo, Venice
41. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *St Terence* (detail), predella panel of the *Pesaro Altarpiece*, oil on wood, 400 x 360mm, 1471-4, Museo Civico, Pesaro
42. Antonio Pisanello (c.1395-1455/6), *Six Nude Women* (detail), pen and ink on parchment, 222 x 165mm, c.1428-32, *Boijmans Van Beuningen*, Rotterdam
43. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *Pietà*, oil on wood, 650 x 900mm, c.1505, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice
44. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *Pietà*, oil on panel, 1060 x 840mm, 1471-74, Pinacoteca, Vatican

45. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *Sacra Conversazione (Madonna and Child with Two Saints)*, oil on wood, 58 x 107 cm, c.1490, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice
46. Gentile da Fabriano (c.1370-1427), *Seated Woman* (detail), Staatlich Museum, Berlin
47. Jacopo Bellini (c.1400-c.1470), *The Annunciation Altar*, tempera on panel, 1444, San Alessandro, Brescia
48. Jacopo Bellini (c.1400-c.1470), *Madonna and Child*, tempera on panel, 600 x 400mm, c. 1450, Musée du Louvre, Paris
49. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *St Jerome*, oil on wood, 490 x 390mm, c.1505, National Gallery of Art, Washington
50. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *Madonna degli Albertti*, oil on panel, 740 x 580mm, 1478, Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice
51. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *St Jerome in the Wilderness*, tempera on panel, 440 x 230mm, late-1450s to early-1460s, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham
52. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *St Jerome*, tempera and oil on wood, 470 x 337mm, c.1480-5, National Gallery, London
53. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *St Jerome*, oil on wood, 1510 x 1130mm, c.1480, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence
54. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *St Francis of the Desert*, oil on panel, 1200 x 1370mm, 1480, Frick Collection, New York
55. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *Transfiguration*, oil on wood, 1150 x 1520mm, c.1487, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples
56. *Christ's Descent into Limbo* (detail), Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum
57. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *Transfiguration* (detail), Naples
58. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *St Jerome* (detail), National Gallery of Art, Washington
59. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *St Jerome* (detail), Uffizi, Florence
60. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *St Francis of the Desert* (detail), Frick Collection, New York
61. *Christ's Descent into Limbo* (detail), Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum
62. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *St Jerome* (detail), National Gallery of Art, Washington



63. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *Transfiguration*, tempera on panel, 1430 x 680mm, c.1460, Museo Correr
64. *Christ's Descent into Limbo* (detail), Bibliothèque Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris
65. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *Transfiguration* (detail), Museo Correr
66. *Christ's Descent into Limbo* (detail), Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum
67. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *Crucifixion*, tempera on wood, 550 x 300mm, c.1455, Museo Correr
68. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *Crucifixion* (detail), Museo Correr
69. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *Transfiguration* (detail), Museo Correr
70. Jacopo Bellini (c.1400-c.1470), *Baptism of Christ*, brown ink on vellum, 422 x 283mm, c.1430-60, sheet 25 of the Musée du Louvre Book, Paris
71. Jacopo Bellini (c.1400-c.1470), *Vision of Saint Eustace*, brown ink on vellum, 422 x 283mm (each sheet), c.1430-60, sheet 41v and 42 of the Musée du Louvre Book, Paris
72. Antonio Vivarini (c.1415-76/84), two panels from the *Passion Polyptych*, tempera on panel, 660 x 2050mm, c.1430-35, Galleria Franchetti, Ca' d'Oro, Venice
73. Bartolomeo Vivarini (c.1432-c.1499), *Triptych of St. Martin*, oil on panel, Galleria dell' Accademia Carrara, Bergamo, Italy
74. Fra Filippo Lippi (c.1406-69), *Adoration of the Child with Saints*, tempera on panel, 1460 x 1570mm, Civic Museum, Prato
75. Fra Filippo Lippi (c.1406-69), *St John Taking Leave of his Parents*, fresco, 1452-65, part of a fresco cycle in the Duomo, Prato
76. *Christ's Descent into Limbo* (detail), Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum
77. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *St Jerome* (detail), Uffizi, Florence
78. Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516), *Crucifixion with Jewish Cemetery*, oil on panel, 810 x 490mm, c.1505, Prato

## Introduction: Condition of the Bristol Painting, Subject and Related Images

The subject of this study is an extensive investigation into the painting *Christ's Descent into Limbo* (oil with some resin on vellum stuck onto panel, 518 x 373mm) at the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum (fig.1). The work has had little attention in scholarly writing and is generally only referred to in reference to its prototype, the engraving (fig.2) of the same subject (445 x 346mm) made by Andrea Mantegna (1430/1-1506), and its generally accepted attribution to Mantegna's brother-in-law, Giovanni Bellini (c.1430-1516). My enquiry is devoted to filling the many gaps in scholarship on the painting as well as addressing some of the misconceptions about the work, particularly its perceived status as simply a 'copy'. Through this study I hope to provide a greater understanding of the painting concerning the subject it represents, the skill of its execution, the process of its making, and the aims of the artist behind it. I also endeavour to reach a sustainable conclusion on the attribution and dating of the picture, which has been disputed. By validating previous arguments and providing a clear evidence for my opinions I will reach a judgement on the authorship of the painting in the last chapter. This, I believe, will strengthen the arguments I have made concerning the work's status, complexity and quality in the previous chapters. I will approach this research through first-hand observation of the painting and other key works, use of unpublished curatorial and conservation documents, connoisseurial comparisons and iconographical examination.

### The Condition of the Bristol Painting

The poor condition of the Bristol painting somewhat masks the high calibre of the work in terms of its coloration, luminosity, detail and finish. The painting suffers from an overall brown tint as a result of a thickly applied resin varnish, and has been retouched in several areas.<sup>1</sup> It is also afflicted with discolouration of pigments

---

<sup>1</sup> Conservation record of the painting made by Tom Caley in April 1987. Unpublished document from the conservation file at the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum, see Appendix Three.

(apparent in the once-green vegetation which has turned dark brown) and blanching (in the stomach of the figure immediately to the right of Christ which has paled to a whitish hue).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, until conservation and cleaning is carried out the full potential of the pigments and, therefore, the artist's talent in colouring, cannot be wholly appreciated as the luminosity of the palette has been significantly dulled.

Although lack of funding is a primary reason for the work having not undergone a thorough conservation, the very delicate state of the painting is also a significant concern. The paint is very thin, so much so that in some areas the underdrawing, in the form of shading or hatching in brown ink with a fine brush or pen, is clearly visible, particularly the demon to the right of the cross.<sup>3</sup> A general brown tone is also perceived throughout the painting due to the thinness of the paint, the transparency of the vellum support and tint of the resin varnish. The paintwork has also suffered from blistering and woodworm while an x-ray from 1987 shows the many nails that hold the tenuous vellum material to the panel support behind (fig.6). Indeed movement of the vellum has caused minute fissures in the paint surface as well as some larger cracks.<sup>4</sup> Clearly the decision of whether to risk further movement and disruption to the work through conservation can not be taken lightly.

## The Subject

Mantegna most likely knew certain depictions of the subject of Christ's Descent into Limbo before he began to construct his own image. These include the three representations by his father-in-law, Jacopo Bellini (c.1400-c.1470),<sup>5</sup> a 13<sup>th</sup> century mosaic in San Marco, Venice - a place Mantegna often visited - and a fresco by Giusto de Menabuoi (c.1320-1391) in the baptistery of Mantegna's hometown, Padua.

---

<sup>2</sup> Conservation record of the painting made by Tom Caley in April 1987. Unpublished document from the conservation file at the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum, see Appendix Three.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Jacopo's three representations of Christ descending into limbo consist of two drawings from his eminent sketchbooks now in the Louvre, Paris, and the British Museum, London, and an oil panel painting in the Museo Civico, Padua. The panel painting was originally part of the predella of the *Gattamelata Altarpiece* of c.1460 that Jacopo executed with the help of his two sons, Gentile (c.1429-1507) and Giovanni. As is evident from his sketchbook drawings, Jacopo constructed the composition for the predella panel of *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, but most scholars believe that Giovanni did the actual painting of the work. See Colin Eisler, *The Genius of Jacopo Bellini: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, New York, 1989, 60 and 358.

Furthermore, Donatello (c.1386-1466), whose Paduan work was well known to Mantegna,<sup>6</sup> executed a bronze relief of the subject in c.1460 for his *North Pulpit* in the church of San Lorenzo, Florence. Primary documentation provides evidence of Mantegna's presence in Florence in both 1466 and 1467,<sup>7</sup> close to the dating usually ascribed to his *Descent* engraving. Other examples of the subject by Italian Renaissance artists include panel paintings by Giotto di Bondone (1267-1337), Duccio di Buoninsegna (c.1255-1319), Giovanni da Rimini (active 1292-1309), and the Master of the Osservanza (active c.1436), while Andrea di Bonaiuto (active 1443-77), Pietro Lorenzetti (c.1280-1348) and Fra Angelico (c.1387-1455) executed frescoes of the subject.

The narrative of Christ's Descent is the event of Christ's journey to limbo after His crucifixion to rescue the Old Testament forefathers, patriarchs, martyrs and prophets, who were not damned but unable to enter Heaven until the coming of Christ.<sup>8</sup> The event is only hinted at in the Bible and has no specific scriptural basis,<sup>9</sup> though it was a concept that strongly appealed to the early Church.<sup>10</sup> The first continuous narrative of the event is found in the third part of the apocryphal text of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, entitled 'Descensus Christi ad infernos'.<sup>11</sup> It was through this dramatic account, which dates from the 5<sup>th</sup> century, that the story gained its popularity particularly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries<sup>12</sup> when it became a standard source for accounts of the Passion in contemporary religious texts.<sup>13</sup> The *Gospel's* influence spread into many domains including ecclesiastical studies, poetry, literature,

---

<sup>6</sup> Harold Osborne (ed.), 'Donatello', from *The Oxford Companion to Art*, Bath, 1997, 323. Donatello was active in Padua between 1443 and 1453.

<sup>7</sup> Niny Garavaglia, *The Complete Paintings of Mantegna*, Milan, 1967, 84.

<sup>8</sup> D. Quinn, J. H. Rohling and P. Verdier, 'Descent of Christ into Hell', from the *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. IV, Washington, 1989, 788-93, 788.

<sup>9</sup> The possible indications of the event found in the Bible are from the New Testament in the books of Matthew (27:52), Peter (3:19) and Psalms (24:7).

<sup>10</sup> D. Quinn, J. H. Rohling and P. Verdier, 'Descent of Christ into Hell' from the *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. IV, 788.

<sup>11</sup> M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford, 1924, provides an English translation with notes from the original Latin version of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*.

<sup>12</sup> J. A. MacCulloch, *The Harrowing of Hell: A Comparative Study of an Early Christian Doctrine*, Edinburgh, 1930, vii.

<sup>13</sup> For example *The Golden Legend* (or *Lives of the Saints*), compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, Archbishop of Genoa, 1275, first published in 1470, includes the narrative of Christ's descent which is based on the account in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. English edition by William Caxton, edited by F. S. Ellis, London, 1931, vol.1, 38-44.

drama and art. It is from the *Gospel's* narrative that much of the traditional iconography found in textual and visual representations of the subject, such as the early examples mentioned, is based.<sup>14</sup>

In both the print and painting the identity of the figures is the same. Christ is centrally placed and seen stooping towards the cavernous entrance to Limbo where the shadow of a figure about to be pulled out is seen. On the right are three figures that have already been delivered from Limbo and these are most likely to be Adam, Eve and their second son Abel. Adam and Eve were always considered to be the first rescued,<sup>15</sup> whilst Abel's innocence death at the hands of his brother Cain made him the first 'just' man and as such he is always present in depictions of the subject, often by his parents.<sup>16</sup> On the left is a male nude with a cross probably identifiable as the Good Thief Dismas holding Christ's cross as it is usually inferred that he descended with Christ to Limbo before going to paradise as Christ promised.<sup>17</sup>

### Related Images

It is quite clear that the engraving was produced before the painting and that the composition was the invention of Mantegna; no scholar has ever proposed otherwise. The design and linear quality is consistent with Mantegna's exemplary draughtsmanship while the unique features of the scene, including the winged demons, rear-facing Christ, rock formation and muscular figures, are found, although remodelled, in other works by him.<sup>18</sup> The dating usually ascribed to Mantegna's print of the late-1460s to early-1470s is based on the work's stylistic characteristics, which are consistent with other art works by the artist in this period, and its relation to three

---

The *Gospel* was also a key source for the first part of *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), entitled *Inferno*, written between 1308 and Dante's death in 1321. See Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, translated by Mark Musa, Penguin Classics, Indiana, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> Zbigniew Izydorczyk (ed.), *The Medieval Gospel of Nicodemus: Texts, Intertexts, and Contexts in Western Europe*, Arizona, 1997, 87.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Fletcher Worthen, *The Harrowing of Hell in the Art of the Italian Renaissance*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1981, 147.

<sup>16</sup> Jill Storer, *The Anastasis in Byzantine Iconography*, unpublished M. Litt dissertation, University of Birmingham, 1986, 98.

<sup>17</sup> Luke 23:43, 'And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, To day shalt thou be with me in paradise'. Taken from *The Holy Bible*, authorised King James Version.

<sup>18</sup> A rear viewed figure is found in the Prado *Death of the Virgin* of c.1461; his *Battle of the Sea Gods* engravings from the 1470s exhibit similarly inventive creatures as the *Descent* demons; whilst his characteristic rock formations feature in paintings and engravings throughout his career.

similar sized engravings by Mantegna that depict other events from Christ's Passion, all dated to c.1465.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, a letter of 28<sup>th</sup> June 1468 from Mantegna to his patron Ludovico Gonzaga reports that he has begun a painting on panel of 'the history of Limbo',<sup>20</sup> indicating that the engraving may have derived from a now-lost painting. A painting of the same subject in the Barbara Piasecka Johnson Collection, New Jersey (fig.4),<sup>21</sup> is usually attributed to Mantegna, but it is unlikely this is the painting referred to in the 1468 letter as critics consider it a late work by the artist dating to the early-1490s.<sup>22</sup>

Relating to this later painting is a drawing in the Robert Lehman Collection that is attributed also to Mantegna (fig.5).<sup>23</sup> Scholars are divided over whether this drawing is connected with the earlier engraving or the later painting as it has significant differences from the design of the print.<sup>24</sup> Most of these differences correspond to the Johnson painting and the style of drawing can also be interpreted as more in keeping with Mantegna's later handling of pen. Indeed, I believe Mantegna did this drawing shortly before the painting as a preparatory work in which the artist explored his earlier conception of the subject before revising it for the painting. As such this drawing as well as the Johnson painting will not form a part of my study, as they are unrelated to the Bristol painting.

---

<sup>19</sup> The three other engravings by Mantegna with subjects from Christ's Passion are *The Deposition* (452 x 362mm (fig.35)), *The Flagellation* (446 x 347mm) and *The Entombment* (443 x 339mm).

<sup>20</sup> Daniela Ferrari, 'Cat.6', from *A Casa di Andrea Mantegna: Cultura artistica a Mantova nel Quattrocento*, exhib. cat., edited by Rodolfo Signorini, Milan, 2006, 353. The relevant extract from the letter reads:

*O principiato el quadro dove io fo la istoria del limbo, chome mi à comandato la illustre signoria vostra. Vero é che io ò avuto el dito quadro, cioè el ligname molto tardi, et questo é stato per la molta pegrícia di Vicencio marangone, o di altri che no' gli à dato el lignamo.*

*I[n]zegneromi a mia posancia di farlo piacere ala illustre signoria vostra.*

There are issues with the translation of the word 'limbo' from the original letter as the handwriting may be read as 'libro' meaning book. However it seems unlikely, as scholars have commented, that Mantegna was making a picture of a book rather than of Limbo as exists.

<sup>21</sup> The painting is executed in tempera and gold on panel and measures 388 x 423mm, but it has been cropped at both the top and left sides.

<sup>22</sup> Keith Christiansen, 'Cat.70' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., edited by Jane Martineau, London, 1992, 269-71. This dating is supported by an inscription reading '1492/MA/AMF' on an engraving of the painting made in the eighteenth-century, which suggests the picture or its original frame bore Mantegna's monogram and the date 1492. Further explanation is given in footnote 8 of chapter one.

<sup>23</sup> The drawing is executed in pen and brown ink with brown wash on paper and measures 270 x 200mm.

<sup>24</sup> David Ekserdjian, 'Cat. 65' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., edited by Jane Martineau, London, 1992, 259-61.

A drawing that will be a focus of my research is the sheet in the Bibliothèque Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris (372 x 280mm), which is directly relatable to both Mantegna's print and the Bristol painting (fig.3). As I will discuss in chapter one, the relationship of this pen-and-ink drawing to the print and painting is disputed but my own judgement on this has important bearing on the making, attribution and status of the Bristol painting.

## Chapter One: Problematic Accounts

This chapter concerns the context of the Bristol painting, examining the facts known about it, how it relates and differentiates from the engraving by Mantegna, how it has been reviewed by critics and what affect this has had on the perceived status of the painting. With no primary documentation or signature on the painting information about it in scholarly literature is generally based on its connection with Mantegna's print and its often challenged attribution to Giovanni Bellini. I shall demonstrate that much more can be said and understood about the painting if further observation and investigations into the work's appearance, execution, materials, and condition are considered. In particular, I will establish that the painting is not just a 'copy' of Mantegna's print, despite following its composition very closely. I will consider the various additions and alterations seen in the painting, the manner of its execution, its use of colour, the choice of vellum as a support, and how the condition of the work has affected its appearance. This argument is needed as so many previous scholars, as I will later show, have labelled the painting as a 'copy'. I will demonstrate that this designation is a misinterpretation of the painting by scholars who have been merely concerned with asserting its direct dependency on Mantegna's design, and have barely mentioned how it differs. Finally, an assessment of the painting's relationship to the Paris drawing is also needed because of the continual debate over this drawing's authorship and purpose. I will resolve these problems through analysing the visual correspondences between the engraving, painting and drawing, in addition to considering the various arguments that scholars have put forward.

### The Bristol Painting

*Christ's Descent into Limbo* at the Bristol museum was brought to the attention of the art world in 1952 with an article in *The Burlington Magazine* by J. Byam Shaw who



stated that it was based on the engraving by Mantegna and attributed it to Bellini.<sup>25</sup> Before this article the painting had been virtually unknown and its first documented public display was only in 1946 when it was donated as part of a bequest to the museum.<sup>26</sup> No primary sources or record of provenance documents the painting prior to its purchase at auction in 1916 from a private collection. The attribution to Bellini is retained on the text panel in the museum and is generally followed by scholars, such as David Ekserdjian,<sup>27</sup> Rona Goffen,<sup>28</sup> Anchise Tempestini,<sup>29</sup> and Keith Christiansen,<sup>30</sup> but it is still widely disputed. Indeed, the museum acknowledges that there is ‘a complex relationship that has yet to be fully understood between this painting and the related works by Mantegna’,<sup>31</sup> suggesting that to describe this work as purely a copy by his brother-in-law could be too simplistic.

It is abundantly apparent that research into the Bristol *Descent* has been very limited. Byam Shaw’s contribution is the longest publication focusing on the painting, but even this is only a two-page article whose main purpose is to give the author’s opinion on the attribution, with limited evidence for his reasoning, and suggest a possible date of production.<sup>32</sup> Whilst Byam Shaw notes the various differences between the painting and the print, he does so only briefly, without detail, and without explaining how this affects the reading of the image as a whole. Moreover, this is not only a limitation of Byam Shaw’s approach, but is also a notable feature of all the other writings on the painting. Indeed, the writings very much show a lack of interest or even a negative impression of the Bristol *Descent*, which is consistently referred to as a ‘copy’, without any reflection on its own merits.

---

<sup>25</sup> J. Byam Shaw, ‘A Giovanni Bellini at Bristol’, *The Burlington Magazine*, no. 591, vol. XCIV, June 1952, 157-9. At the time of Byam Shaw writing his article the painting was labelled in the museum as ‘School of Andrea Mantegna’.

<sup>26</sup> The painting was given to the museum by F. N. Schiller. Schiller had acquired the work in 1917 from a dealer who bought the painting from a Christie’s auction the previous year where it had been labelled as ‘School of Dürer’ (a title that was given before its connection to the Mantegna prints had been discovered). The painting’s provenance before this auction is unknown. Recorded in the curatorial file at the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum, accessed 14<sup>th</sup> November 2008.

<sup>27</sup> David Ekserdjian, ‘Cat. 69’ from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., 267.

<sup>28</sup> Rona Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, New Haven and London, 1989, 284.

<sup>29</sup> Anchise Tempestini, *Giovanni Bellini*, translated by Alexandra Bonfante, Milan, 1999, 65 and 68.

<sup>30</sup> Keith Christiansen, ‘Bellini and Mantegna’ from *The Cambridge Companion to Giovanni Bellini*, edited by Peter Humfrey, New York, 2008, 72.

<sup>31</sup> Text panel at the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum.

<sup>32</sup> J. Byam Shaw, ‘A Giovanni Bellini at Bristol’, 157-9.

The main monographs on Giovanni Bellini by Giles Robertson,<sup>33</sup> Goffen,<sup>34</sup> and Tempestini,<sup>35</sup> all attribute the painting to Bellini. But their references to the work are each restricted to little more than a dozen sentences, enough space to identify the prototype for the work, explain the narrative of the subject of Christ's descent and not much else. For Robertson and Goffen the painting poses a problem as their biographic approach to Bellini's works in their books repeatedly asserts the artist's independence from the influence of Mantegna. Both authors admit that Bellini was inspired by the work of his brother-in-law, but they see this as a trait found only in his early career (up to the early-1460s) and even then they emphasise Bellini's individual style and unique skills. It is not for me in this project to research the topic of Mantegna's and Bellini's artistic relationship far beyond the Bristol painting, but clearly Goffen and Robertson find it hard to explain its reoccurrence in the Bristol *Descent*, and so do not attempt to do so. In monographs on Mantegna it is rare to find the Bristol painting mentioned at all and Ronald Lightbown only gives the work half a sentence among his meagre discussion on Mantegna's images of the subject.<sup>36</sup>

Those authors that do not agree with the Bellini attribution, for example Oskar Bätschmann<sup>37</sup> and Jennifer Fletcher,<sup>38</sup> are keen to belittle the painting, pointing out all the faults they find in it, ignoring any merits, and not giving much space to it in their discussions. The 1992 *Mantegna* catalogue devoted a full chapter to the various versions of *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, of which seven were displayed in the exhibition,<sup>39</sup> including the print, the Bristol painting, and Paris drawing. In the catalogue entry for the Bristol painting, Ekserdjian typically focuses on the religious narrative of the subject, but not the narrative differences between the painting and the print.<sup>40</sup> He notes the various alterations made in the painting, but does not explore them further. He remarks on the use of colour, noting the range of pigments used, yet does go into the critical fact that the artist transformed a monochrome image into

---

<sup>33</sup> Giles Robertson, *Giovanni Bellini*, Oxford, 1968, 25-6 and 75.

<sup>34</sup> Rona Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, 284.

<sup>35</sup> Anchise Tempestini, *Giovanni Bellini*, 65, 68 and 204.

<sup>36</sup> Ronald Lightbown, *Andrea Mantegna*, Oxford, 1986, 88.

<sup>37</sup> Oskar Bätschmann, *Giovanni Bellini*, London, 2008, 50.

<sup>38</sup> Jennifer Fletcher, 'Mantegna and Venice' from *Mantegna and 15<sup>th</sup>-Century Court Culture* edited by Francis Ames-Lewis, Sussex, 1993, 17-25, 19-20.

<sup>39</sup> David Ekserdjian, 'The Descent into Limbo' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., edited by Jane Martineau, London, 1992, 258-9.

<sup>40</sup> David Ekserdjian, 'Cat. 69' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., 267.

colour through his own invention, and how thus affecting the viewer's perception of the image and the subject. Had he done so he would have drawn attention to the talent of Bellini, to whom he ascribes the work to, and this was not the object of the catalogue or the exhibition as this was persistently to assert Mantegna's supremacy over Bellini. The catalogue entry for the Bristol painting is, therefore, conceived as an ideal opportunity for asserting Mantegna's abilities over Bellini's without reference to the qualities of the latter, if he was the author of the work, or of the painting itself.

The shortcomings concerning the lack of discussion of the Bristol painting in the *Mantegna* catalogue led the then assistant curator at the Bristol art gallery, Sheena Stoddard, to write to Michael Hirst in the year following the exhibition and express her dismay at the fact that the very rare event of so many versions of the *Descent* being displayed together had not 'stimulated discussion among scholars'.<sup>41</sup> She also enquired as to why the attribution to Bellini had been so readily accepted and no mention made of the previous disputes.<sup>42</sup> To his credit, Hirst, in his review of the exhibition,<sup>43</sup> had berated the catalogue's failure to explore the disputes over the attribution, but this was something he was unwilling to undertake himself in his short review, probable because he did not consider Bellini the artist of the Bristol painting.<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, however, he did not reply to Stoddard's letter and no discussion of the problem was forthcoming.

More recently, an essay by Christiansen, entitled 'Bellini and Mantegna' and published in 2004, gave only a few sentences to the Bristol painting. Once again no mention was made of its disputed attribution and it was allotted the status of a 'copy' and a generalised example of 'Bellini's "re-visiting" of Mantegna's art'.<sup>45</sup> This was

---

<sup>41</sup> Letter from Sheena Stoddard in Bristol to Michael Hirst at the Courtauld Institute, London, 19<sup>th</sup> February 1993. Unpublished document from the curatorial file at the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum, see Appendix One. Sheena Stoddard is now the curator of the fine art collection at the museum.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Michael Hirst, 'Mantegna. London and New York', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 134, no. 1070, May, 1992, 318-321, 321.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 319. This conclusion was reached by the critic in part from following the opinion of, although not fully explaining it, the senior conservator Jill Dunkerton who undertook a technical examination on the painting at the National Gallery, London, in 1987. This event will be discussed further in chapter three.

<sup>45</sup> Keith Christiansen, 'Bellini and Mantegna', 48-74, 48 and 71-2.

despite the aims of Christiansen's essay, which were to explain the influence Mantegna and other artists had on the work of Bellini. His shortcomings may be explained by the fact that the only source he cites for the painting is the limiting catalogue entry by Ekserdjian,<sup>46</sup> which may suggest he did not have access to any other literature on the painting and may, therefore, have been unaware of its contested attribution.

These inadequate accounts of the Bristol painting in scholarship do, however, allow for me to make a reappraisal of the work and its possible artist. It is my intention to investigate all the areas of contention and assess the validity of the various arguments made by the scholars as well as shedding light on elements of the painting that have previously been overlooked. In particular I will dispute the frequent conclusion that the Bristol painting is a 'copy' of Mantegna's engraving. For instance, Lightbown's only reference to the painting is a sentence which labelled it as a copy by Bellini,<sup>47</sup> Goffen states it to be 'indisputably a copy',<sup>48</sup> and Fletcher believes it to be comparable to the mid-fifteenth century 'Venetian taste for colouring in copies of prints'.<sup>49</sup> Yet, the work is not a faithful copy of Mantegna's engraving as along with the use of colour several additions and alterations have been made to the original composition. Although some scholars, namely Byam Shaw, Tempestini and Ekserdjian, do briefly mention these deviations from the original, many others, including Goffen, Robertson, Fletcher, and Bätschmann do not.

Despite the painting's close dependency on Mantegna's composition, the addition of colour transforms the stark, bleak visual impression of the engraving. Whilst comments have been made on the use of colour in the Bristol painting, these have merely been to state its presence and note the warm, earthy tones that have been used. Goffen is one of the few scholars to remark on the significance of a monochrome image being used as the source for a coloured painting of such luminosity and detail.<sup>50</sup> But, like Robertson<sup>51</sup> and Ekserdjian,<sup>52</sup> her remarks are only cursory and do not do, in

---

<sup>46</sup> Keith Christiansen, 'Bellini and Mantegna', 72, footnote 40.

<sup>47</sup> Ronald Lightbown, *Mantegna*, 88.

<sup>48</sup> Rona Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, 284.

<sup>49</sup> Jennifer Fletcher, 'Mantegna and Venice', 20.

<sup>50</sup> Rona Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, 284-5.

<sup>51</sup> Giles Robertson, *Giovanni Bellini*, 75.

<sup>52</sup> David Ekserdjian, 'Cat. 69' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., 267 and 269.

my opinion, full justice to the consequence of using colour. The full impact and importance of using colour will be explored in the second chapter in conjunction with a detailed consideration of the other alterations and additions of the work.

The key additions and alterations in the Bristol painting which are not in the print include identifiable plants and foliage among the rocks and a book wedged beneath the broken door where Mantegna had placed a hinge. They also include the female nude who was transformed from an aged crone found in the engraving to a young and attractive woman. Other inclusions are seen in the extended headpiece of the cross, the changed appearance of the central demon and the flames added to the horns they blow. Furthermore the rock formation in the painting has been completely extended and thrown into shadow on the right-hand side so that, unlike the print, no suggestion of a background landscape is given. Furthermore, a minute *cartellino* has also been painted in the foreground, bottom right, of the painting. Although Ekserdjian states that it is too small to have ever been intended to carry an inscription,<sup>53</sup> its size (roughly 20mm in length and little more than 5mm in height) could contain initials or a date though why it remains blank is unknown.

A further alteration in the Bristol painting from the print is the semi-concealed profile of a face seen in the *voussoir* stone above the left demon in Mantegna's engraving (figs 7, 8, 9 and 10). Not only is its position changed in the painting to directly above the tail of the central devil, but the semblance is formed out of projecting rocks rather than cracks within a single stone. Only Ekserdjian and Byam Shaw note this change, but with no further discussion bar Ekserdjian's comment that the alteration from the original may show the artist acknowledging Mantegna's humour.<sup>54</sup> However, I interpret the more hidden position and subtle outline of the 'rock face' in the painting as a clever development from Mantegna and another indication of the inventiveness of the artist of the Bristol painting. Clearly he was fully acquainted with Mantegna's 'rock face', but his version is more concealed, less obvious to the viewer who would be unaccustomed to such observations. Such 'chance images by nature', as H. W.

---

<sup>53</sup> David Ekserdjian, 'Cat. 69' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., 267.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

Janson refers to them,<sup>55</sup> were only noticed by the most visually aware, such as artists. The author of the Bristol painting was perhaps wishing to ‘improve’ upon the more recognisable ‘rock face’ in the print.

With these extra details and amendments the painting contrast greatly with Mantegna’s conception of the scene where everything is more bleak and threatening. The mere presence of vegetation and the artist’s choice of a yellow-toned rocky exterior when it could have been cold and grey, provides a more positive outlook. Colour also contributes to the reading of the image such as in the contrast of Christ’s white robes with the dark entrance to Limbo and ochre tonality of its. Christ’s figure would have appeared even more impressive when originally conceived as the faded pink of his undergarment would have been a vibrant hue and his halo a much brighter yellow making Him stand out more prominently from the dark arch of Limbo. Elsewhere, the colour also enhances the inventive design, such as, for example, in the reptilian lower halves of the winged demons which are depicted in various shades of dark green and red brown with highlighted areas enhancing their foreshortened poses.

Noticeably the haggard and anguished Eve found in the print is replaced in the painting by a graceful, reserved young Eve rendered in the artist’s smooth paintwork with rounded forms seen also in the figures that accompany her. As such, the Bristol painting cannot be considered a ‘copy’ of Mantegna’s print as obvious invention and skill has transformed the sharp lines of the engraving into smoother forms executed with precise brushstrokes of numerous hues. I believe the alterations and additions in the Bristol painting have been done for more than just aesthetic reasons and that they, along with the incorporation of colour, change the appearance and interpretation of the scene from what is seen in the engraved print (this will be proved in chapter two). Furthermore, the skill possessed by the artist of the Bristol *Descent* in painting was not limited just to a competent handling of pigment and a skilful conception of tone. The small scale of the piece highlights his acute attention to detail, particularly with regard to the rocks and plants, both of which differ from those in Mantegna’s composition.

---

<sup>55</sup> H. W. Janson, ‘The Image made by Chance’, in *De artibus opuscula XL: Essays in Honour of Erwin*

Crucial to understanding the Bristol painting is the support on which it is executed this being vellum stuck down onto a panel rather than on the usual canvas covered panel support typical of fifteenth-century paintings. Nevertheless, the use of vellum has been somewhat ignored by scholars who just connect the painting with illuminated manuscripts or miniatures, despite its rather larger size.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, Fletcher even points to the use of vellum as evidence against an attribution to Bellini by stating that the material is indicative of a ‘reproduction’ of Mantegna’s print by an amateur artist.<sup>57</sup> I find fault with this argument (which I refer to again in chapter three) and instead assert the material and the artist’s skilful use of its properties for the Bristol painting is, instead, indicative that this is the work of no ‘amateur artist’.

The curatorial file on the painting provides no record of when the vellum was stuck down onto the panel and no consideration of the matter is found in the scholarly literature. An idea of whether the panel is contemporaneous with the painting is important as this may help in understanding the function of the work, whether it was intended as a book illumination, a hung painting, or a portable devotional image. Kay Sutton judges that it is ‘pretty well certain that the parchment was glued onto a panel from the start (whether or not it is the panel that supports it now, which could be a later replacement).’<sup>58</sup> Her reasoning for this was that the flexibility of the vellum would have made it very difficult for an artist to paint in oil directly.<sup>59</sup> Thus despite the comments of scholars that the painting is relatable to a manuscript illumination, I propose that the work was actually intended to be an independent work of art. The intricate detail and small-scale of the piece (for example the tiny *cartellino* in the bottom right corner) further suggest that it was intended to be closely inspected, perhaps making it more likely that it functioned as a portable devotional object rather than a wall painting. Kay Sutton has also drawn my attention to other paintings on a vellum glued to a wooden panel, including *Head of Christ* by Petrus Christus (c.1410-

---

*Panofsky*, edited by M. Meiss, New York, 1961, 254-66.

<sup>56</sup> Giles Robertson states that the painting ‘is in fact a large illumination on vellum’ (*Giovanni Bellini*, 75). Ronald Lightbown calls it ‘a miniature on vellum’ (*Andrea Mantegna*, 88). David Ekserdjian only remarks on the vellum support is that it is ‘the material of an illuminator’ (‘Cat. 69’ from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., 267). Rona Goffen uses the painting’s support for evidence of what a lost manuscript illumination by Giovanni Bellini may have looked like (*Giovanni Bellini*, 284). Anchise Tempestini (*Giovanni Bellini*, translated by, 204) and Oskar Bätschmann (*Giovanni Bellini*, 50) both cite the support to be parchment with no further discussion about the material.

<sup>57</sup> Jennifer Fletcher, ‘Mantegna and Venice’, 20.

<sup>58</sup> Emailed correspondence with Kay Sutton, 9<sup>th</sup> June 2009, see Appendix Two.

1472/73) in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, and the *Old Couple* by Jan Gossaert (c.1478-1532) in the National Gallery, London, which suggests these were not so uncommon.<sup>60</sup>

Superior than, although hard to distinguish from, parchment, which is made from any untanned animal skin, vellum is usually made from the unblemished skin of a calf giving it an especially fine surface.<sup>61</sup> It was an expensive material in comparison to the more available support of canvas on panel indicating that no amateur artist would readily choose such a material. Furthermore a patron of such a work would not entrust the commission to any minor artist without experience and skill in painting on vellum. The flawless, smooth finish of vellum provides a remarkable drawing surface and it was this particular quality that Kay Sutton regarded as a primary reason for its use as a painting surface. This is coupled with the fact that its use meant the artist did not need to spend hours preparing a pristine finish with gesso to a panel.<sup>62</sup> Vellum also possesses distinct optical qualities in its ivory colour and slight transparency, in contrast to many parchments that have a white tonality and as such are more opaque.<sup>63</sup> These qualities of tonality and surface seem to have been exploited by the artist of the Bristol painting as no ground was used on the support and the paint only thinly applied.<sup>64</sup> The ivory hue and slight transparency of the support would have enhanced the warm and earthy colour scheme of the painting, which unfortunately is not now apparent due to the age and poor condition of the work.

### The Paris Drawing

The Paris drawing is clearly a preliminary design of the composition found in Mantegna's print and the Bristol painting.<sup>65</sup> The composition of the drawing is

---

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Beverley Schreiber Jacoby, 'Drawing: Materials and Techniques' from *The Grove Dictionary of Art* edited by Jane Turner, London, 1996, vol.9, 215-19, 215. The very best quality, uterine vellum, was made from the skins of stillborn or unborn calves.

<sup>62</sup> Emailed correspondence with Kay Sutton, 9<sup>th</sup> June 2009, see Appendix Two.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>64</sup> Conservation record of the painting made by Tom Caley in April 1987. Unpublished document from the conservation file at the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum, see Appendix Three.

<sup>65</sup> For a full description of the drawing's provenance and scholarly reference see; David Ekserdjian, 'Cat. 66' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., edited by Jane Martineau, London, 1992, 261-3; or



almost identical to the engraving, but there are some very notable differences that link it unequivocally with the Bristol painting, as such, scholars dispute the attribution of the drawing to either Mantegna or the artist behind the Bristol picture. By reaching a conclusion on the attribution, creation and purpose of the Paris drawing a much greater understanding of the production and attribution of the Bristol painting can be gained. Furthermore, the Paris drawing may help to explain some of the decisive changes that the artist of the painting has made from Mantegna's image.

The Paris drawing displays certain features that are also found in the Bristol painting but are different from those in the print by Mantegna meaning that the drawing must have been known intimately by the artist of the Bristol picture. For example the continuation of the rock face to the right of the cave entrance in the painting is also present in the Paris drawing. The cross held by Dismas in the Paris drawing and Bristol painting also has an extended top piece not found in the print, whilst Christ's standard, like the Bristol painting, does not include the extra piece of material found in the print. Other correspondences include the foreground rock formation, which although obscured by vegetation in the painting, uses the same structure as the drawing. Additionally, the square-shaped rear of the central figure on the right in the drawing deviates from the print but is akin to the depiction in the painting.

However, there are elements of the Paris drawing that differ from the Bristol painting indicating that the painting is not a direct copy of either the drawing or the print. A prominent difference in all three works is the appearance of Eve. As previously mentioned, the artist of the Bristol painting has amended the appearance of Eve from the print, yet in the Paris drawing her figure is unfinished and appears to have been rubbed out. The Paris drawing seems to document the change of conception found in the Eve of the print and that of her painting, as her left arm, albeit faint, is drawn across her body in the modest gesture found in the Bristol painting. Yet, uncertainty about how best to depict Eve is suggested by the empty or rubbed out area of her head and chest, which, indeed, is the precise area where the Bristol painting differs most from the print. Directly above Eve the winged demon has also been drawn only in outline, but, importantly, this outline clearly shows the altered face and body that is

found only in the Bristol painting. The two nails found at the foot of the cross in the print are distinctly absent from both the Paris drawing and Bristol painting, yet the drawing does not include the book under the door. The Paris drawing has an unfinished background with an absence of rocks around the entrance to Limbo or definition of those to the right-hand side. This suggests the work was more of a detailed compositional and figural study rather than a finished drawing and that the Bristol artist although thoroughly acquainted with the drawing made further changes to the design of both print and drawing. Nevertheless, a paramount similarity between the Paris drawing and the Bristol painting, and one that will be discussed in greater detail, is that both are executed on vellum.

These strong links between the Paris drawing and the Bristol painting led Byam Shaw, in a later article of 1952, to attribute the drawing also to the hand of Bellini and to characterise it as a form of ‘preparatory’ drawing.<sup>66</sup> This argument, however, is based purely on the visual similarities, and it does not mention medium or the possibility of the drawing being by Mantegna to whom it was ascribed to when Byam Shaw wrote his article.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the style of the completed areas with clear, defined strokes and confident shading are characteristic of Mantegna’s style in the 1470s and 1480s, as argued by Robertson.<sup>68</sup> But scholars, including Lightbown,<sup>69</sup> Hirst,<sup>70</sup> George Goldner,<sup>71</sup> and Goffen<sup>72</sup> have doubted an attribution of the Paris drawing to Mantegna due to the weak and unfinished passages of the work, although it should be

---

Dominique Thiébaud, France, 2008, 196-8.

<sup>66</sup> J. Byam Shaw, ‘A Further Note on the Bristol Bellini’, *The Burlington Magazine*, vol.94, no.593, Aug. 1952, 236-7.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 236. Byam Shaw states that he had seen the drawing twenty years previous to writing his article on the Bristol painting and accounts for its ‘good quality’.

<sup>68</sup> Giles Robertson, *Giovanni Bellini*, 25.

<sup>69</sup> Ronald Lightbown, *Andrea Mantegna*, 492. In his catalogue Lightbown lists the Paris drawing under the category of works made after Mantegna’s designs without suggesting an artist for the work.

<sup>70</sup> Michael Hirst, ‘Mantegna. London and New York’, 321. Hirst states that the drawing has ‘no claim to be regarded’ as by Mantegna as it is not similar to other authenticated works by the master.

<sup>71</sup> George R. Goldner, ‘Review: Andrea Mantegna [Exhibition Catalogue] by Jane Martineau’, *Master Drawings*, vol. 31, no.2, (summer 1993), 172-6, 174.

<sup>72</sup> Rona Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, 284. Goffen gives no definitive answer as to the attribution of the Paris drawing though she is adamant that Bellini is the author of the Bristol painting. As reasoning for her indecision Goffen states that, ‘no drawing has been attributed to Giovanni Bellini without some dispute. And the argument often concerns the alternate possibility of an attribution to Mantegna.’ Further discussion on questions of attribution for drawings by Mantegna or Bellini can be found in; H. Tietze and E. Tietze-Conrat, *Drawings of the Venetian Painters*, New York, 1944; and George Goldner ‘Bellini’s Drawings’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Giovanni Bellini* edited by Peter Humfrey, 226-55, though neither authors mention the Paris *Descent* drawing.

noted that the drawing is damaged and possibly retouched in parts.<sup>73</sup> In the 1961 Mantegna exhibition in Mantua, moreover, it was catalogued under the name of Bellini.<sup>74</sup> Yet, it was restored back to Mantegna for the 2008-9 exhibition on the artist at the Louvre, Paris.<sup>75</sup> Though I do not deny the observations made by Robertson, the fact that the drawing is executed on vellum and the areas of change match those in the Bristol painting and contrast to the prints cannot be considered just coincidental, but surely relate the drawing directly to the painting.

The observations made by Ekserdjian<sup>76</sup> and David Landau<sup>77</sup> provide key evidence to explain the purpose and importance of the Paris drawing. Both scholars support Robertson's argument on the draughtsmanship of the drawing and attribute it to Mantegna. However, they go further than Robertson and suggest that the drawing is a preparatory work for the print, used for transfer by a non-damaging method. Landau explains that by 'superimposing enlarged transparencies of the two works, it becomes obvious that the image was transferred from one sheet to the other by tracing, or some other mechanical means.'<sup>78</sup> He goes on to explain that differences between the spatial distance of the figures indicate that the group of three were transferred at a separate time, whilst the two demons to the left and right were also 'traced independently of each other and any other part of the composition.'<sup>79</sup> It is taken as fact by Ekserdjian and Landau that it was Mantegna's hand behind this tracing of figures from drawing to print and they quickly dismiss the alterations of the Paris composition, so

---

<sup>73</sup> J. Byam Shaw, 'A Further Note on the Bristol Bellini', 236-7.

<sup>74</sup> A. Mezzetti, 'No. 130', from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., edited by G. Paccagnini with A. Mezzetti and M. Foglioli, Mantua, 1961. The drawing was also ascribed to 'studio of Mantegna', for example at the exhibition *Les Dessins vénitiens des collections de l'Ecole des Beaux-Arts* held at the Bibliothèque Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris, in 1990. This suggested attribution was quickly dismissed by scholars due to the high quality of draughtsmanship found in the finished areas of the work. Additionally, the purposeful changes of the composition from the print do not indicate the hand of an assistant to these areas of invention as they would be unlikely to alter their master's work.

<sup>75</sup> The exhibition, entitled *Mantegna 1431-1506*, took place at the Musée du Louvre between 26<sup>th</sup> September 2008 and 5<sup>th</sup> January 2009.

<sup>76</sup> David Ekserdjian, 'Cat. 66' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., 263. Interestingly, the Paris drawing is dated to c.1470 in the catalogue entry by Ekserdjian, whilst the print attributed to Andrea Mantegna on the next page of the catalogue, whose description is by David Landau, is given the date of late 1460s, despite both authors claiming the drawing to be the precursor for the print. This is perhaps just a typographic error, but it does highlight the continual problem and debate in dating the individual works.

<sup>77</sup> David Landau, 'Cat. 67 a, b' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., edited by Jane Martineau, London, 1992, 263 and 265.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

inconsistent with Mantegna's style, as evidence of it being 'a creative drawing'.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, they also claim that the similarities between the Bristol painting and the drawing show only that the artist of the painting was aware of both the print and drawing.<sup>81</sup>

Through performing the same experiment described by Landau with superimposed transparencies of the print and drawing, I cannot reject his claim that these similarities indicate the tracing of figures from one composition to another.<sup>82</sup> I do, however, reject the chronology ascribed by Ekserdjian and Landau, as well as their explanation of the alterations that are inconsistent with both Mantegna's style and his end design yet often corresponding directly with those in the Bristol painting. I propose that the artist of the Bristol painting created the Paris drawing by tracing the forms from the print, at different periods, as Landau suggests, onto the vellum support. In fact, the transparent qualities of vellum previously mentioned would make tracing the figures more manageable from print to vellum and then vellum to vellum for the painting.

Drawings by Mantegna in preparation for engravings or painted compositions were all, to my knowledge, executed on paper (including the Lehman *Descent* drawing) the making it difficult to understand why Mantegna would choose vellum for the Paris drawing. The only works on vellum associated with Mantegna are illuminated miniatures, *The Chronicles of Eusebius* (1450, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, Venice)<sup>83</sup> and the *Life and Passion of St Maurice* (c.1453, Bibliothèque de L'Arsenal, Paris), both of which are uncertain in attribution, with the latter argued by some, with good reason, to be by Giovanni Bellini.<sup>84</sup> A reason as to why Mantegna would chose to execute a drawing on vellum when he was so accustomed to the support of paper is not explained by Robertson, Ekserdjian or Landau. It seems more likely, to me, that

---

<sup>80</sup> David Ekserdjian, 'Cat. 66' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., 263.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 'The Descent into Limbo', 259.

<sup>82</sup> Appendix Four contains transparencies of the print and drawing which can be superimposed on the illustrations of the painting, print and drawing (figs 1, 2 and 3) to demonstrate the possible tracing process undertaken.

<sup>83</sup> David Ekserdjian, 'Cat.7' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., 123-5. The miniature is stated only as 'attributed to Andrea Mantegna' by Ekserdjian who note that the authorship is completely open to suggestion.

<sup>84</sup> Albinia de la Mare and David Ekserdjian, 'Cat.10' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., 129-33. Those scholars arguing for the attribution to Giovanni Bellini include Giles Robertson (*Giovanni Bellini*, 17-21) and Joost-Gaugier ('A Pair of Miniatures by a Panel Painter: The Earliest Works of Giovanni Bellini?', *Paragone*, XXX, 375, 1979, 48-71).

the Paris drawing was carried out by the author of the Bristol picture transferring the forms from the printed engraving in preparation for painting the composition on the same support he used for the preparatory drawing.

In view of this attribution of the Paris drawing to the artist of the painting a greater understanding about the function of the drawing and the creative process behind the painting can be gained. The alterations of the Paris drawing are more consistent with an artist working from a chosen prototype, making his own adaptations as he sees fit and then transferring these inventions into the painting whilst making further alterations to the final work. It had been suggested that the extensive detailed underdrawing of the Bristol painting and the fact that it is executed on vellum, a material more traditionally suited to drawings, watercolours and illuminations, could possibly mean that its composition was first conceived as a drawing in its own right.<sup>85</sup> But, the existence of the Paris drawing and the obvious skill and consideration that went into the painting of the Bristol *Descent* make it more likely that the drawing acted as the artist's personal version of Mantegna's print from which he drew the underdrawing for the painting. Indeed the composition of the drawing is executed in the same direction as the painting and of a similar size, allowing the artist to easily visualise the composition of the finished work.

Robertson's argument that the lines of the rock formations in the drawing are more typical of Mantegna than Bellini can be rebutted if the drawing was simply replicated from the clear, stark lines of the printed engraving. As will be shown in the third chapter, the underdrawing of the Bristol *Descent* closely follows the lines of both the print and drawing in parts. The exceptions to this are the areas of alteration where the artist either erased the original (perhaps accounting for the rubbed-out appearance of certain passages) or only drew initial outlines. Evidence of the erasing illustrate the artist's working process of reproducing the printed engraving onto the vellum of the Paris drawing before working on the underdrawing for the vellum of the Bristol painting. The choice of such an expensive material as vellum for a preparatory drawing may indicate that the artist originally intended the Paris sheet to be the finished painting, yet the number of alterations and indecision on elements of

Mantegna's print made by the artist meant that a second vellum sheet was needed and the Paris composition became a preparatory work. On this basis, the Paris drawing would date to shortly before the Bristol painting, whose dating I will resolve in chapter three.

---

<sup>85</sup> Phillipa Bishop, unpublished essay on the Bristol *Descent* written between 1987 and 1992, from the

## Chapter Two: An Altered Interpretation

The aim of this chapter is to gain a greater understanding into the theological meaning embodied in the images seen in the print by Mantegna and in the Bristol painting. I believe a detailed study into the religious message constructed in the print will elucidate the significance of Mantegna's innovative composition and treatment of figures in terms of its theological implications rather than the artistic ones which are consistently referred to by scholars. Additionally, I shall endeavour to prove that the differences from the print seen in the painting are not only to do with its appearance, but crucially also alter the theological message conveyed in the print. Detailed research into the iconography of the various details of the painting has previously not been undertaken. By filling this obvious gap in scholarship I hope to illustrate that the author of the painting was highly skilled and knowledgeable and, again, that the painting cannot be considered to be simply a 'copy'. Research into the symbology of the painting's various details will also help in my assessment on the work's attribution in the last chapter. Furthermore, this investigation into the theological meaning of both works will also provide an insight into the level of spiritual knowledge that the patron and viewer of either work must have had in order to comprehend fully its message.

The subject and significance of Christ's Descent into Limbo and its representation in art can easily be researched in books such as James Hall's *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*<sup>86</sup> and the *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*.<sup>87</sup> Yet, these works only impart a standard iconography and basic interpretation of the subject rather than provide a depth of understanding needed to comprehend the image produced by Mantegna, which in many ways departs from the set artistic and literary models that these texts refer to. There were a large number of religious texts written in the thirteenth and

---

curatorial file at Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum.

<sup>86</sup> James Hall (ed.), *The Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, Cambridge, 1996, 100.

<sup>87</sup> J. D. Quinn, J. H. Rohling and P. Verdier, 'Descent of Christ into Hell' from the *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. IV, 788-93.

fourteenth centuries that include narratives of the Descent, and many of these would have been available to Mantegna - and the artist of the Bristol painting - perhaps influencing their conception of the subject.<sup>88</sup>

Nevertheless, scholarly literature on both the print and the Bristol painting rarely, if at all, mentions the religious basis of the works beyond giving a brief explanation of the subject. They do not venture to explain the theological message communicated to the viewer by these images to the intended viewer of the mid to late fifteenth-century, who had an absolute belief in heaven and hell. Scholars, such as Ekserdjian<sup>89</sup> and Landau,<sup>90</sup> are keen to identify the original elements of Mantegna's composition: the back-view of Christ; the foreshortened, reptilian, winged devils; and the contorted poses of the rescued figures on the right. However, they rarely venture to explain why such features should have been preferred to previous representations of the subject and, critically, how these alterations change the meaning of the subject and how the viewer could have perceived it.

An instructive feature of Mantegna's print that is not found in previous representations of the Descent is the inclusion of demons blowing horns. More typically various demonic creatures are seen merely fleeing from Christ, as in examples by Giotto (fig.11) and Fra Angelico (fig.12) and Jacopo Bellini's panel painting and drawings (figs 13, 14, and 15). The incorporation of the horn, and the clear distress the noise causes to the figures below, both have a theological meaning even though scholars have not noted this. The iconography of a devil blowing a horn symbolises how, as one writer has put it, 'in contrast to the perfect harmony of the music of heaven, hell was most often associated with cacophony and unpleasant

---

<sup>88</sup> Examples of literary descriptions of the Descent that may have been available to Mantegna and the artist of the Bristol painting include; Jacobus da Voragine's *The Golden Legend*; Vincent of Beauvais' *Speculum Historiale*; St Antoninus' *Contrasto del Nostro Signore*; St. Bonaventura's *The Meditations on the Life of Christ*; Ludolf of Saxony's *Vita Jesu Christi*; and Niccolò Cicerchia's *La Risurrezione*. Interestingly copies of the latter three texts are recorded in the inventory of Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga, brother to Mantegna's patron Ludovico Gonzaga, Marquese of Mantua. See D. S. Chambers, *A Renaissance Cardinal and His Worldly Goods: The Will and Inventory of Francesco Gonzaga (1444-1483)*, London, 1992, 167 (I 707) and 168 (I 714, 723 and 725).

<sup>89</sup> David Ekserdjian, 'The Descent into Limbo' and 'Cat.65' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., 258-9 and 261.

<sup>90</sup> David Landau, 'Cat.67a, b' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., 263 and 265.



sound'.<sup>91</sup> Clearly, therefore, the Mantegna print is reinforcing and reminding the viewer of the horror of all things associated with hell and the devil.

There is also a major thematic departure from earlier visual representations that use the 'standard' iconography, as noted by Hall<sup>92</sup> and George Ferguson,<sup>93</sup> which can be seen in works by the likes of Duccio (fig.16), the Master of the Osservanza (fig.17), Andrea di Bonaiuto (fig.18), Giotto, and Pietro Lorenzetti (fig.19), to name but a few. All these paintings show only Christ's defeat of the devil, who is squashed under the door to limbo and under the feet of Christ, often bound in chains, whilst all other demonic creatures flee from Him. Additionally in such paintings, the devil and his minions are generally small, black, cowering figures of no physical strength or threat. It is clear in these depictions that it is Christ who brings horror to hell rather than showing the horror of hell as Mantegna does with his demons. Not only do these demons blow their horns but they are not fleeing from the entrance as traditionally described and focus instead on disturbing the figures below and, indeed, the demon on the right is even flying back towards the doors. Furthermore, they are of considerable size and strength particularly as they are in positions of power above the grounded figures. The attention of the rescued figures, and even Dismas (who is often present in earlier pictures), is, therefore, not on Christ their saviour but occupied by the continuing terror and noise the demons cause. This is in stark contrast to the more conventional works of Giovanni di Rimini (fig.20), Giusto de'Menabuoi (fig.21) and the mosaic in San Marco, Venice (fig.22), where the rescued figures are shown knelt in prayer or with hands held out in thanks and elation looking only at the figure of Christ, unaware of any demons that may be around them. In doing so these representations conform to the narrative and message of Christ's Descent into Limbo found in the *Gospel of Nicodemus* account, which, as Richard Harris states, 'symbolises Christ's conquest over evil and death, holding out hope to the whole of humanity, the departed as well as the living.'<sup>94</sup> Viewers of such traditional visual representations would have also been clear that, as J. A. MacCulloch notes, Christ's

---

<sup>91</sup> Clifford Davidson and Thomas H. Sellar (eds), *The Iconography of Hell*, Michigan, 1992.

<sup>92</sup> James Hall (ed.), *The Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, 100.

<sup>93</sup> George Ferguson, *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art*, New York, 1961, 91.

<sup>94</sup> Richard Harris, *The Passion in Art*, Bournemouth, 2004, 39.

Descent ‘had made death and the underworld powerless’ and ‘what he had done once he might be willing to do again’.<sup>95</sup>

Mantegna’s interpretation does not give the same impression of Christ conquering evil. There is no devil beneath the door, the demons cause terror and the rescued do not appear exulted and comforted by Christ’s act of salvation. In addition, the figure of Christ does not entirely suggest a conquering hero or a symbol of hope. Only His triumphal banner of the Resurrection, His halo and clothed body clearly distinguish His divine status from the other figures. This is in strong contrast to the established iconography of the subject found in earlier paintings where, as described by Ferguson, Christ is depicted as ‘large and commanding, dressed in gleaming garments’.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, often the figure of Christ in Descent images is decisively larger than of those He rescues, as seen in Donatello’s relief (fig.23) and Pietro Lorenzetti’s fresco. This is distinctly not the case in Mantegna’s composition, where Christ’s stooped form makes Him actually appear smaller. Moreover, although Mantegna’s Christ is clothed, they are not the ‘gleaming garments’ found wrapped around Andrea di Bonaiuto’s or Fra Angelico’s figures of Christ, and nor is Mantegna’s halo the same glowing mandorla used by Giotto, Giusto de’ Menabuoi, or even Jacopo Bellini.

Pivotal to the conception of the figure of Christ in Mantegna’s print is the fact that His back is towards the viewer. Mantegna has rejected the use of the traditional side-view showing Christ with arm out-stretched (seen in all earlier versions) and, instead, has presented an entirely new conception. The back-viewed figure as a dominant and dramatic compositional feature is found in other works by Mantegna, for example the Prado *Death of the Virgin*, c.1460 (fig.24), and the now-destroyed *St James Preaching*, c.1450 (fig.25), in the Eremitani Chapel, Padua, and emphasises his exceptional skill as a draughtsman. Yet, its particular use for the figure of Christ in the *Descent* also has theological implications although scholars have not explored this. Mantegna is not presenting the viewer with Christ as a physically commanding and powerful figure, but rather stresses his humanity. Christ’s redemptive power in Mantegna’s image comes not from physical stature and strength but rather the sacred event of His Passion, which, as will be shown, is clearly referred to by Mantegna.

---

<sup>95</sup> J. A. MacCulloch, *The Harrowing of Hell: A Comparative Study of an Early Christian Doctrine*, 41.

The absence of the figure of the devil bound with chains beneath the broken doors to Limbo in Mantegna's print goes against the narrative found in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*,<sup>97</sup> which was the literary basis for the iconography of the subject. By contrast, in accounts of the Descent by the Early Fathers in the Old Testament,<sup>98</sup> focus was placed on the soteriological function of the subject rather than in the emphasis given to Christ's defeat of the devil found in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*. Friedrich Loofs clearly observes this important difference when stating that the earlier references to the Descent made 'no mention of the victory over Satan in connection with the Descent, the only meaning of the descent-idea being that Christ, like all the dead, went down to Hades and there imparted His salvation to the Old Testament saints.'<sup>99</sup> This is why I believe that Mantegna's representation of the Descent is centred on illustrating the doctrine of salvation rather than an example of Christ's victory over the devil.

In such context Mantegna's image would strongly adhere to the influential teachings on the subject by the thirteenth-century saint and theologian Thomas Aquinas,<sup>100</sup> which would eventually become the official position of the Catholic Church following the Counter-Reformation.<sup>101</sup> Like the Early Fathers, Thomas Aquinas made no mention of the devil since he had been overcome by Christ's Passion.<sup>102</sup> References to Christ's Passion are easily found in Mantegna's print. Most obvious is His cross held by Dismas, but also the two sets of nails from the broken door in the foreground, which, whilst being an instrument of Christ's death, are also both positioned in the form of crosses. The drapery covering Christ alludes to the shrouds in which he was

---

<sup>96</sup> George Ferguson, *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art*, 91.

<sup>97</sup> The interpretation of the devil being crushed under the doors and feet of Christ comes from the section of the Gospel that reads: 'Then did the King of glory in his majesty trample upon death, and laid hold on Satan the prince and delivered him unto the power of Hell, and drew Adam to him unto his own brightness'. Translation from M. R. James, 'The Gospel of Nicodemus or Acts of Pilate', *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford, 1924

<sup>98</sup> J. D. Quinn, 'Descent of Christ into Hell' from the *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, 789. The main account of Christ's Descent into Limbo by the Early Fathers is found in the *Jeremiah Apocryphon* cited by St Irenaeus in his text *Adversus Haereses*, 3.20.4 and 4.22.1.

<sup>99</sup> Friedrich Loofs, 'Christ's Descent into Hell' from *Transactions of the Third International Congress for the History of Religions*, edited by P. S. Allen, vol. II, Oxford, 1908, 290-301, 293.

<sup>100</sup> St Thomas Aquinas discussed the subject of Christ's Descent into Limbo extensively in two of his writings, his commentary on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard ('Commentum in Quatuor Libros Sententiarum Magistri Petri Lombardi', in *Opera Omnia*, vol. VIII, 3a, 22, Parma, 1858) and his *Summa Theologica* written 1265–1274 (translated by R. T. A. Murphy, New York and London, 1964 vol.54, 3a.52.,).

<sup>101</sup> J. H. Rohling, 'Descent of Christ into Hell' from the *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, 791

<sup>102</sup> St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by R. T. A. Murphey, 3a.52.1.

wrapped when brought down from the cross. Furthermore, the caved entrance is reminiscent of the cave in which Christ was buried before his Resurrection. These clear connections to Christ's Passion again remind the viewer of the sacrifice Christ had had to make to redeem man and the need for their absolute faith. Additionally, the print's links (mentioned in the introduction)<sup>103</sup> with three other engravings by Mantegna depicting scenes from the Passion further show the central importance of this event to the artist's conception of the subject.

Even more crucially in reference to Mantegna's print, Thomas Aquinas stated that whilst in Limbo the holy patriarchs suffered from no actual physical pain, but were subjected to a far worse torture which was 'the deferment of desired glory'.<sup>104</sup> This doctrine accords with Mantegna's presentation of the figures released from Limbo since they, although not visually scarred, are obviously suffering greatly from the presence of the demon creatures above and aware that, still in the realm of Limbo, they are not yet free from evil. In this way, Mantegna's interpretation of the subject focuses on the importance of Christ's Descent as an example to unbelievers of their doomed fate and eternal torture, as well as illustrating the conventional message of redemption for the righteous who came before Christ. In his writings Thomas Aquinas also clearly stated the different purposes that Christ had when he descended to Limbo, which again provide a theological basis to Mantegna's unique interpretation of the subject:

*He went to the hell of the damned to confound the damned for their unbelief and malice; to those who were detained in purgatory he brought the hope of a future glory; and to the holy patriarchs who were in hell only on account of original sin, he brought the light of eternal glory.*<sup>105</sup>

As such, Mantegna's image does not portray the same signs of elation, glory, divine power and gratitude seen in previous representations of the subject. Instead he gives a bleaker and more sobering account of the event, and perhaps hints that even the faithful may have to spend some time in purgatory suffering a similar torture.

---

<sup>103</sup> See footnote 2 of the introduction for the titles of the engravings.

<sup>104</sup> St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by R. T. A. Murphey, 3a.52.2.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 3a.52.2.

The nudity and aged appearance of the rescued figures in the print are further artistic innovations by Mantegna, but they also have theological implications that have not been approached in scholarly literature. Because Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge they became mere mortals and, as such, depicting them as frail and aged alludes to their original sin and their need for redemption by Christ.<sup>106</sup> Indeed it was Christ's arrival in Limbo that spelt the end of death as a permanent state for the righteous since, as one writer puts it, 'the age-old cycle of death and decay inaugurated by Adam's sin is now said to have been reversed by Christ's inability to be bound to death.'<sup>107</sup> Once they are in heaven their souls, and as a consequence their bodies, will be fully atoned and all sins forgiven. As will be discussed later, this contrasts with their representation in the Bristol painting so one can conclude that the artist of the Bristol painting considered the presence of Christ alone enough to counteract the aging process.

From these considerations of the doctrinal content conveyed in the Mantegna print, I will now argue that the theological message to be conveyed by the Bristol painting was distinctly different. The numerous changes made by the author of the Bristol painting play a vital role in this image's meaning yet they have never been thoroughly explored. Ekserdjian and Tempestini have both referred to vague symbolic associations attached to the foliage; the former stating them to be indicative of events from the Passion,<sup>108</sup> and the latter affirming the fig branch in the top right-hand corner of the painting to be a 'Christological symbol'.<sup>109</sup> This, however, is the limit of scholarly discussion on this aspect of the painting. Through a more thorough study into the possible allusions of these additional features and a consideration of their placement in the Bristol painting I aim to illustrate their fuller significance.

Most obvious of the alterations made in the painting is the inclusion of vegetation, creeping amongst the rocks and sprouting in the cracks of the foreground, because in the print the rock face is bare and barren. Despite being much blackened by the discolouration of the pigment over the years, the various species can still be identified.

---

<sup>106</sup> Thomas Fletcher Worthen, *The Harrowing of Hell in the Art of the Italian Renaissance*, 108.

<sup>107</sup> J. K. Elliot (ed.), 'Jesus and the Underworld' from *The Apocryphal Jesus: Legends of the Early Church*, New York, 1996, 97.

<sup>108</sup> David Ekserdjian, 'Cat. 69' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., 267.

<sup>109</sup> Anchise Tempestini, *Giovanni Bellini*, 66.

Around the left side of the arch and trailing towards the figure of Dismas with the cross are vines of ivy whilst above, growing out a fissure from the rock is a fig plant, and parallel to this on the right-hand side of the crag is a bare branch projecting out into the patch of sky. The foreground is home to a number of thorns and thistles that grow freely in the cracks. All of these plants have a direct symbolic association with the spiritual meaning of the *Descent into Limbo*, and not just the Passion as Ekserdjian have asserted. As I will show, the theological associations of the plants were then given greater emphasis by the artist's careful choice of location for them and, in some cases, this provided additional messages and connotations. The representation and deliberate positioning of the plants shows that the artist of the Bristol painting was not only highly accomplished but also very well-informed on how to use religious symbols to enhance the meaning and narrative of the subject of Christ's Descent into Limbo. The inclusion of these symbolic forms also indicates that the original owner of the painting was an educated person and perhaps even a theologian.

By the Middle Ages, ivy had become an emblem of the immortality of the soul after death, because of it being an evergreen plant.<sup>110</sup> Hence, it was often included in representations of the Nativity, such as the engraving by Martin Schongauer (c.1448-1491) of c.1470-5 (fig.26), as it symbolises the birth of the Saviour who has come to redeem the souls of man. These associations of the plant made it entirely appropriate for its inclusion for a scene representing Christ's Descent into Limbo to rescue the souls of the faithful dead after Christ Himself had sacrificed His life, yet it is unique to the Bristol painting. Additionally, because ivy clings so closely to its support, it is interpreted as a symbol of eternal life and the promise of salvation, as well as loyalty and fidelity.<sup>111</sup> In the Bristol painting the ivy is a sign of the promise of salvation that Christ endows on the patriarchs delivered from Limbo who have shown fidelity to God and are now rewarded. It is fitting that it should be positioned directly above the figure of Dismas holding the cross, the most prominent symbol of salvation and showing that even at the entrance to hell redemption can still be found.

Because of its strong symbolic association with salvation and the fact that its strong roots make it hard to extirpate, ivy can, in fact, even stand as a symbol of Christ

---

<sup>110</sup> Lucia Impelluso, *Nature and Its Symbols*, translated by Stephen Sartarelli, Hong Kong, 2004, 50.

itself.<sup>112</sup> This relationship between ivy and Christ can also be extended to the physical appearance of both since, as Lucia Impelluso states, ivy's 'luxuriant shoots depend on rather slender stalks, just as Jesus Christ appears modest in his human guise but is rich in his incorruptible divine essence.'<sup>113</sup> Christ's modest appearance in the Bristol *Descent* has not changed from the print apart from the addition of colour. Clearly the artist of the painting felt no need to change the figure to a more commanding and visually divine power that would conform to the more usual iconography of the subject, and decided instead to continue to emphasize his humanity. The ivy (only found in the painting), too, appears unassuming, but it does in fact take over much of the rock surface on the far left as it begins on a level with the arched entrance to Limbo and ends just below the knee of Dismas. The painter has also signalled that the growth of the ivy continues outside of the picture frame indicating that the slender vines of the plant have spread further afield to allow the production of more rich shoots and leaves.

Furthermore, as the ivy creeps down from the structured rock formation above the entrance it has tangled itself around some of the more prominent boulders. Ivy, as a climbing plant, grows rapidly and the strength of its survival against such a solid structure as rock is due to the binding of its aerial roots through any crevice that can be found. As such, ivy can have a destructive affect on the surfaces which it attaches itself. This damaging trait of ivy was well known in antiquity and Pliny recorded it in his *Natural History* where he noted that, 'ivy is injurious to all trees and shrubs and makes its way through tombs and walls.'<sup>114</sup> It can well be imagined that over time the vigorous growth of the ivy in the Bristol painting could dislodge some of the boulders it has wrapped itself around. Indeed, if the painter meant the viewer to interpret the ivy as standing for Christ himself, the possible destruction of the rocks by the ivy parallels the actions of Christ breaking down the doors to Limbo, despite both plant and Christ appearing modest in physical strength and substance. In this respect too, the fig tree is analogous to the ivy in being considered to be a plant that could rupture

---

<sup>111</sup> James Hall, *The Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, 76.

<sup>112</sup> Lucia Impelluso, *Nature and Its Symbols*, 50 and 52

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 50

<sup>114</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, xvi, 62 (English translation by John Bostock, London, 1855, 3400). A similar comment on the destructiveness of ivy can also be found in Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, ix, 33, 7 (English translation by W.H.S. Jones, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1918).

rock as strong as marble, as is evident from a passage in Juvenal.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, the corrosive affects of both fig and ivy are seen together in Mantegna's Louvre *St Sebastian*, c.1480 (fig.27), where they almost burst through and split the marble pillar on which St Sebastian is tied. The author of the Bristol painting may have likewise intended the viewer to be aware of the rending properties of ivy and fig plants, such as by showing their woven stems and stalks in the already fractured rocks above Limbo's entrance, symbolise the damaging affect of Christ's arrival and action to the structure and existence of Limbo. Indeed, the fig and ivy are not the only plants seen to invade the rocks surrounding Limbo as other vegetation appears in the cracks further to the right, creating further crevices and in doing so adding to the numerous pebbles littered on the ground below.

The fig tree is also directly associated with Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden since it was the leaves from this tree that they used to conceal their nakedness after the Fall (Genesis 3:7).<sup>116</sup> This has meant that the fig tree sometimes appears as an alternative to the apple as the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden, on which God had placed the penalty of death if Adam were to eat it.<sup>117</sup> It was through succumbing to temptation that Adam and Eve were denied eternal life and bliss on earth and instead become mere mortals toiling the land until their death, which was when their souls are placed in Limbo to await the coming of Christ. It was Adam, according to all literary accounts, whom Christ first pulled from Limbo to perform 'the redemption of the first sinner from his original sin.'<sup>118</sup> A prime example of the use of a fig tree for the Tree of Knowledge is the fourteenth-century relief of the *Temptation of Adam and Eve* on the west corner of the Palazzo Ducale in Venice (fig.28).<sup>119</sup>

---

<sup>115</sup> Juvenal, *Satire X*, 144 (English translation by Peter Green, London, 1998).

<sup>116</sup> 'And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they *were* naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.' Taken from *The Holy Bible*, authorised King James Version.

<sup>117</sup> Gertrude Grace Sill, *A Handbook of Symbols in Christian Art*, New York, 1975, 55. The Bible does not specify what species of tree the Tree of Knowledge was and it is only mention in Genesis 2:9, 17 and it is referred to in Genesis 3:3, 11, 17, 22.

<sup>118</sup> Thomas Fletcher Worthen, *The Harrowing of Hell in the Art of the Italian Renaissance*, 8.

<sup>119</sup> A fig tree instead of an apple tree is also found *The Fall and Expulsion from Garden of Eden* by Michelangelo (1475-1564) on the Sistine Chapel Ceiling, 1509-10.



The fig tree, as an emblem of Original Sin, is found in a number of fifteenth-century paintings, for example *Christ Crowned with Thorns* by Giovanni Bellini, Stockholm (fig.29), as it was Christ's death that will free mankind. With this in mind, I interpret the fig tree's inclusion and position in the Bristol painting as intentionally specific and relevant to the scene. Curving in an opposing arch to that of Limbo's entrance in the top left corner, the fig tree is placed in a diagonal line with the three grouped figures of Adam, Eve, and their second son Abel. Despite the relatively close proximity between the tree and figures they are separated by the dark chasm of Limbo. I perceive this to be symptomatic of the vast period of time that has elapsed between Adam and Eve's Expulsion from Eden, in which the fig tree played a prominent role, and their final redemption through Christ's sacrifice and descent into Limbo.

Crucially, the fig tree in the Bristol painting bears no fruit, only leaves. The fig tree can have positive connotations in the Bible as a symbol of salvation, fertility, and good works, but this is due to its prolific production of seeds and fruit.<sup>120</sup> In a fruitless state it alludes to a much more negative biblical passage, this being the cursing of the barren fig tree by Christ found in Mark 11:12-14, Mark 11:20-24 and Matthew 21:18-22. The fig tree is referred to some sixty times in the Bible and is often used in association with, or allusion to, Israel, both the nation and its inhabitants.<sup>121</sup> Christ's cursing of the barren fig tree happened when, journeying back from the city, He was hungry and finding a fig tree without fruit cursed the tree causing it to wither on the following day. The fruitless fig tree could be understood to be the nation and inhabitants of Israel, who despite being God's chosen people, did not believe in Christ and so would not find salvation.<sup>122</sup> The lack of fruit on the tree and its subsequent withering could also be interpreted as illustrating the poor and fruitless teachings of the Sadducees and Pharisees.<sup>123</sup> With this symbology the parable could demonstrate that, as Matthew Henry states, 'we should rest in no

---

<sup>120</sup> George Ferguson, *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art*, 31. Proverbs 27:17-19 and Isaiah 38:21-22 provide positive associations for the fig tree.

<sup>121</sup> Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, Michigan, 2002, 243. References to the fig tree as Israel can be found in the Old Testament books of Hosea 9:10 and Joel 1:7.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 242. A similar parable about a barren fig tree is also found in Luke 13:6-9, which although not directly involving Christ, has a similar doctrinal message.

<sup>123</sup> Lawrence O. Richards, *Bible Teacher's Commentary*, Colorado, 2002, 580. Indeed, the event occurring in-between the cursing and the withering of the tree, as recorded in Mark 11:15-18, is Christ's clearing of the Temple in Jerusalem. This is a prime example of the poverty of the law of the

religion that does not make us fruitful in good works'.<sup>124</sup> Thus in the context of the Bristol painting and its subject of Christ's Descent into Limbo, a similar interpretation of the fruitless fig tree can be taken to represent not only Christ's sacrifice and the salvation he provided to the faithful, but also the doomed fate that awaited those who did not convert within time. But, crucially, the fruitless tree and its connection with the perceived impoverished law of the Jews, as taught by the Sadducees and Pharisees and found in the Old Testament, represents the supersession of Christ and His teaching. As will be shown, it is not only the fig tree in the Bristol painting that can be interpreted as a symbol of Christian law succeeding that of Jewish law.

I believe the artist of the Bristol painting fully understood the appropriateness of incorporating the fig tree, which, although fruitless, bares a number of healthy leaves. As previously mentioned, a distinct innovation in Mantegna's print is the depiction of the patriarchs, along with Dismas, naked, rather than fully-clothed as they appear in many traditional representations, or covered with loin clothes as in Jacopo Bellini's panel. The stark nudity of Adam, Eve and Abel is reinforced by the symbolic presence of the fig leaves in a key location diagonally above them. Yet, the sense of shame at their nudity is not perceivable in comparison to the acute mortification typically represented in scenes of the Expulsion, such as that by Masaccio (1401-c.1428) in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence. Adam and Abel are wholly occupied by the terror the winged demons inflict upon them and not by their nakedness. Whilst Eve strikes the pose of a modest Venus, this would be the artist evoking the Renaissance concept of beauty equalling purity, which furthers the message of redemption. The Eve depicted in the Bristol painting shows a woman that has served her time in Limbo and is now redeemed by Christ. As such she is no longer ashamed of her nudity but stands in humble humility at having her sins forgiven. Indeed, the young face of Eve and her idealised body, in contrast to Mantegna's haggard representation, seems to propose to me an Eve from the golden age before the Fall, rather than depicting her horrific duration in Limbo as Mantegna is keen to illustrate. Her slender physique is then further enhanced by the fact that her form, along with the two nude figures, is slightly elongated in comparison to the prints. The amount of

---

Jewish people and their ignorance of Christ's teachings, which allowed for the misuse of a house of prayer.

<sup>124</sup> Matthew Henry, *Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Tennessee, 1997, 924.

elongation becomes evident from superimposing an enlarged transparency of the print over an image of the painting.<sup>125</sup>

The thorns and thistles in the foreground of the painting are directly associated with Christ's Passion and the Crown of Thorns he was forced to wear. These plants, like the nails from the broken door located nearby, reinforce the reality of Christ's sacrifice and that the salvation of those in Limbo could only have been achieved by Christ's own death. The foreground positioning of the thorns and nails emphasise the prominence of their symbolic meaning in relation to the subject of the painting. However, thorns and thistles also had another strong theological association, which is revealed in Genesis 3:17-18 where the curse God placed on Adam following his exile from the Garden of Eden is recorded: 'cursed *is* the ground for thy sake; in sorrow thou shalt eat *of* it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field'.<sup>126</sup> As a consequence of this sentence God placed on man, thorns and thistles became symbolic of earthly sorrow and sin, and they represented the toil that is man's fate after Original Sin.<sup>127</sup> Their existence in ground that is to be used for growing edible plants is a further burden to man. The presence in the rocks of the foreground of the Bristol painting is thus evocative of this curse as the arid and barren ground by Limbo's entrance which can only provide life for thistles and thorns. The plants therefore act as a further reminder to the viewer of Mankind's Fall through the temptation of Adam and Eve and of why Christ's death and deliverance of souls from Limbo was imperative. Furthermore, despite the discolouration of the pigments and poor condition of the painting, the white highlights used on some of the leaves are still clearly perceivable. And this together with their very detailed rendering further reinforces the fact that these plants were meant to be noticed by the intended viewer who would take into account the multiple theological meanings attached to them. This is especially noticeable in the plant that is placed right at the bottom of the picture in the centre, a particularly prominent position that is in alignment with the space between Christ and the figure of Eve.

---

<sup>125</sup> Appendix Four contains a transparency of the print that can be superimposed on the illustration of the painting (fig.1) to demonstrate the elongation of the figures.

<sup>126</sup> Taken from *The Holy Bible*, authorised King James Version.

Also protruding from the rock face on the right-hand side above the winged demon is a bare branch. Although devoid of leaf, it firmly grips the rock and is not yet expired. Presumably it is undergoing the seasonal dying and renewal of all plants and is, therefore, a symbol of those souls in Limbo about to be rescued by Christ who have the hope of salvation and renewal unlike those condemned to Hell. Indeed, it projects out into the blue sky above the winged demons and away from the entrance to Limbo and instead towards the source of light and regeneration found in the sun.

Clearly the added vegetation in the painting is of considered and precise inclusion and its appearance would have been more noticeable and inspiring when the green pigments were fresh and vibrant. The author of the Bristol painting seemed to believe it necessary to include these extra signs of salvation and sacrifice as a further reminder to the viewer of the religious importance of Christ's Descent into Limbo. The various species of vegetation provide the basic symbology of plant life equally new life. In contrast to the infertile and empty climate depicted in Mantegna's prints, the mere inclusion of green foliage enlivens and brings optimism to what is quite an intimidating scene. Additionally, in a more practical function, the vegetation provided a complementary colour to set against the earthy browns and yellows of the rocks, a consideration not of consequence to the monochrome compositions.

Byam Shaw, whilst he does not investigate the symbolic meaning of the various plants and the significance of their positioning, nevertheless interprets 'the frail plants and creepers' as 'making their way to the sun as though themselves released from a limbo of sterility'.<sup>128</sup> Those plants in the rocky fissures above Dismas do indeed seem to be growing outwards from the arched entrance to Limbo. However, Byam Shaw's comment about their fragility may have held less weight when the work was initially painted and the vivid greens of the vegetation juxtaposed against the backdrop. Instead, I believe, in their original condition the plants of the Bristol *Descent* would have promoted a very positive connotation to the contemporary viewer. The fresh, bright colours combined with the symbolic meanings of the plants, like the young appealing face of Eve, could well have been associated with the paradise of the Garden of Eden and notions of Heaven which await the rescued. Green often

---

<sup>127</sup> George Ferguson, *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art*, 38.

represents hope, regeneration and fertility. As the colour of vegetation and of spring, it symbolises the triumph of spring over winter, or life over death.<sup>129</sup> This contrasts greatly with Mantegna's image where the bleak, barren rock face, devoid of any suggestion of living forms beyond the figures portrayed who are decrepit and wretched, does not give the same signs of hope and salvation found in the Bristol painting.

A crucial addition to the composition of the Bristol painting is the heavy, embossed, silver-coloured book seen underneath the door where before, in the prints and Paris drawing, there was a broken hinge. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Mantegna's conception of the subject without Satan crushed beneath the doors is unprecedented in Italian art. The presence of a book under the door in the Bristol painting is also unmatched and not easily explainable through recourse to visual iconography. It may be that the book is simply a reinterpretation of the broken hinge shape found in the Paris drawing and print. But considering the suffusion of symbolic meanings in other additions made to the scene in the foliage, nudity of the figures, and the features of Eve, it would seem that the book was also intended to convey a profound theological message.

It is only Ekserdjian and Byam Shaw that have noted the inclusion of a book in the Bristol painting. The much shorter commentaries by Goffen, Robertson, Tempestini, Bätschmann and Fletcher miss this detail altogether, along with numerous other points that their accounts do not allow space for. Unsurprisingly, therefore, no previous scholar has investigated the possible meaning of the book. Ekserdjian's reference to it merely comments on its presence in the painting and lack of presence in the print and Paris drawing. He does not venture an identity for the text or give a reason for the book's presence under the door. Byam Shaw, in contrast, labels the book as 'a heavy Bible', although this is only in a brief footnote to his article and it is given no further discussion by the author other than his comment of it being a 'curious difference of

---

<sup>128</sup> J. Byam Shaw, 'A Giovanni Bellini at Bristol', 159.

<sup>129</sup> George Ferguson, *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art*, 153.

detail'.<sup>130</sup> His claim as to the book's identity is made without explanation, like all other scholars, he does not explore the possible symbology attached to its inclusion.

In view of the book's size and silver embossed cover it is understandable why Byam Shaw may have concluded it to be the Bible. The book's silver cover would certainly support such an identity as silver represents the truth and the Bible, being the word of God, is unquestionably the 'truth' for Christians. The quote from Psalm 12:6, 'The words of the Lord *are* pure words: *as* silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times',<sup>131</sup> combines the true word of God with silver, illustrating this metal's suitability as a material for a cover of the Bible. However, the presence of such a sacred text crushed under the door where traditionally Satan appeared in conventional representations would seem highly inappropriate. It could easily, however, represent one of three other notable texts, all of which are religious and were regarded as the word or judgement of God, which would therefore, account for the impressive appearance of the book and its silver cover.<sup>132</sup> Crucially all three texts have a theological connection to the subject of Christ's Descent into Limbo, in a manner that the Bible does not since it barely only hints at the journey to Limbo made by Christ.

One possibility is the *Book of Life*, which is an allegorical book referred to six times in the *Book of Revelations* from the Bible.<sup>133</sup> It was described in Revelations 20:12 as a book in which God records the names of the righteous from the foundation of the world until the Day of Judgment.<sup>134</sup> The *Book of Life* is a suitable suggestion for the book in the Bristol painting because Christ's descent into Limbo to rescue the patriarchs, prophets, martyrs and forefathers from before His birth finally gave them the salvation they were accorded by God for their righteousness. Therefore, Christ's journey to Limbo would erase their names from the *Book of Life* which, in the

---

<sup>130</sup> J. Byam Shaw, 'A Giovanni Bellini at Bristol', 157, footnote 3. Byam Shaw refers to the book as a Bible again without explanation in his later article ('A Further Note on the Bristol Bellini', 236-7).

<sup>131</sup> Taken from *The Holy Bible*, authorised King James Version.

<sup>132</sup> I am greatly indebted for the time and knowledge given by Professor David Parker from the Theology Department of the University of Birmingham and Professor Keith Elliott, lecturer in Theology at the University of Leeds who specialises in Apocryphal texts.

<sup>133</sup> Revelations 3:5, 13:8, 17:8, 20:12, 20:15 and 21:27. Reference to the *Book of Life* is also found in Psalm 69:28 and Philippians 4:3.

<sup>134</sup> The *Book of Revelations* (20:12) speaks of its use on Judgment day: 'And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the book was opened: and another book was opened, which is *the book of life*: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.' Taken from *The Holy Bible*, authorised King James Version.

painting, would be symbolically shown by it being crushed beneath the door to Limbo.

The other two suggestions regarding the book's identity are that it is the text of Jewish Law (this being the first five books of the Bible) or the Old Testament as a whole. Symbolically the concept of either book being crushed under the fallen door to Limbo would denote the end of the law of the Jewish Prophets and Christ's supersession (the same theme, as discussed earlier, implied by the barren fig tree). The texts of both the Old Testament and Jewish Law feature the lives of the prophets, martyrs and forefathers that Christ has journeyed to Limbo to rescue, their days without Christ in their lives being now at an end is a new religious epoch. Again the fact that the book in the painting is crushed but not destroyed is important as it conforms to the words of Christ from the *Book of Matthew* which said, 'Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.'<sup>135</sup> In other passages of the New Testament it is made clear that Christ was not an opponent of the law of God in the Old Testament or the Law of the Prophets but, that he was, in fact, the consummation of that system by succeeding his forerunners. As such, the book of Jewish Law and the Old Testament will survive, but they are not the book of Christ's life and this could be symbolised in the Bristol painting by the presence of the book under the door, unharmed, and specifically positioned in front of those already rescued since it is in this book that their lives are featured.

It is hard, if not impossible, to be sure which exact one of the three texts the book in the painting was supposed to represent, but this is not vital to understanding the importance of its inclusion. The book, like the vegetation, is primarily symbolic of Christ's salvation of the patriarchs, His sacrifice for mankind, and, crucially, His succession of the old faith (represented by those He rescues). Furthermore, by uncovering more possible and appropriate identities for the book, in opposition to Byam Shaw's suggestion of a 'heavy Bible', another aspect of the Bristol painting is revealed. Undoubtedly the artist of this intriguing work was keenly aware of the religious gravity of the image he was painting and added his interpretation of the subject by altering the original composition. What was previously a door hinge with

---

<sup>135</sup> 'Matthew 5:17' taken from *The Holy Bible*, authorised King James Version.

little purpose beyond illustrating Christ's breaking of the entrance to Limbo was transformed into an object with a specific theological message. It could only have been a very knowledgeable and experienced artist who frequently painted religious images full of symbolic forms who could revisualise a broken hinge as a religious book with specific connotations to Christ's Descent into Limbo.

Clearly the artist of the Bristol work was aware of the desolate impression given by Mantegna's print and resolved to use the same composition but render a more optimistic, religiously symbolic and aesthetically appealing representation. The lack of symbolic vegetation and forms in Mantegna's print should not, however, be interpreted as a sign that the artist was unaware of such emblematic potential. Indeed, Mantegna was only too aware of the theological meanings attached to specific plants and fruits as he used them extensively in many of his paintings. The *Adoration of the Shepherds* (c.1453, New York), the *San Zeno Altarpiece* (c.1457, Verona) and the *Trivulzio Madonna* (c.1497, Castello Sforzesco, Milan), are just some of the works in which Mantegna employed fruit, plants, and trees to enhance the symbology of his religious subjects. Indeed, even the three other Passion engravings by Mantegna include trees and plants that symbolically refer to the events taking place within the landscapes. It can therefore be concluded that Mantegna intentionally did not depict vegetation in the *Descent* as the location of Limbo was in the realm of the devil unlike the landscape on earth where Christ's Crucifixion took place. The desolate scene in the *Descent* was thus purposefully intended by Mantegna in order to enhance the potent meaning of the subject as a reminder of the horrors that will await those who are faithless, and also of the enormity of Christ's sacrifice through his Passion. In contrast the Bristol painting, with its altered imagery, returns to an extent to the prime interpretation of Christ's journey to Limbo as an act of salvation and a vision of hope to the viewer, yet in retaining key elements of Mantegna's composition, such as the threatening demons and dark chasm, the viewer is still reminded of the doom awaiting the unfaithful. The painting also adds the additional message of Christ's supersession of the old faith and law. The conclusion that the artist of the Bristol *Descent* was attempting to 'improve' Mantegna's image can again be interpreted, this time by how the meaning of the subject changes with the symbology of the alterations and incorporation of colour in the painting. These specific theological differences from



Mantegna's composition clearly illustrate that the painting is much more than a mere 'copy' of the print and that acknowledgement is due to the artist behind it.

## Chapter Three: A Work of an Accomplished Master

In an unpublished essay on the Bristol *Descent* written by Phillpa Bishop (a former curator of the art gallery) between 1987 and 1992, she remarks that since the publication of Bernard Berenson's *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance: Venetian School* in 1957,<sup>136</sup> which included the Bristol painting under Bellini's name, 'all the authorities writing on Bellini have confirmed the contribution'.<sup>137</sup> However, this is not the case. The list of scholars who follow the attribution of Byam Shaw and Berenson is quite large in comparison to those who argue against it, but those who contest it, some of whom are of considerable eminence, make valid points. Furthermore, the fact that the painting has only been in public knowledge for just over fifty years helps explain why so much more needs to be said. Indeed, while differing art historians have each made reasonable cases to support their opinions none of them have made a sufficiently detailed inquiry that deals with all the varying aspects of the debate. My investigation into the attribution of the Bristol *Descent* will review all the evidence and the arguments put forward by the different scholars and assess their validity. In addition, I will put forward evidence for my own conclusion.

The key weaknesses for those scholars arguing against the attribution of Bellini are their suggestions, or lack of suggestions, of another possible artist for the painting. Apart from the initial attribution of the painting to 'School of Dürer', before its connection to Mantegna's prints was realised,<sup>138</sup> few names were given as alternatives to Giovanni Bellini. Bäschmann's indecision on the attribution to Bellini is accompanied by his failure to propose another, although he was keen to assign other works in his monograph to 'the studio of Bellini' or 'Bellini's workshop'.<sup>139</sup> This

---

<sup>136</sup> Bernard Berenson, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance: Venetian School*, London, 1957.

<sup>137</sup> Phillpa Bishop, unpublished essay on the Bristol *Descent* written between 1987 and 1992, from the curatorial file at Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum. The essay is only in the form of an unfinished draft in several versions, the most complete being eight pages in length but still containing numerous hand-written corrections and alterations.

<sup>138</sup> After the initial ascription to the 'School of Dürer' but before Byam Shaw's article, the work was re-titled as 'School of Mantegna'. This is most likely due to acknowledgement of the connection with Mantegna's *Descent* print but obvious visual evidence that the painting was not by the master himself. Information gained from the curatorial file on the painting at the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum.

<sup>139</sup> Oskar Bäschmann, *Giovanni Bellini*, 50.

rather indicates that Bächtzmann, though he believed the Bristol painting to be too inferior to be by the master himself, recognised that it had a quality that could not allow it to be a studio execution. Hirst<sup>140</sup> and Kristen Lippincott<sup>141</sup> also dispute the Bellini attribution but without suggesting a possible alternative artist.

In her questioning of the attribution of the Bristol painting, Sheena Stoddard states in her letter that certain elements of the work have more in common with paintings by Mantegna than those by Giovanni Bellini.<sup>142</sup> Although she does not directly state that Mantegna could be the artist of the Bristol painting, this is implied. However, the lack of any specific statement to clarify this more clearly shows that the suggestion had little substance and from the outset of the painting's appearance to the public an attribution to Mantegna himself was never made.<sup>143</sup> The Bristol *Descent*, although derived from one of his prints, is starkly different to Mantegna's paintings. The characterisation of form does not take on the sculptural solidity characteristic of Mantegna's work, while the colouring has no equivalent in Mantegna's paintings, which do not show the same fluidity in tonal blending. This is without mentioning the numerous additions and alterations made to a composition that Mantegna obviously already thought was complete enough for engraving. Additionally, the slenderised figures that have lost some of the anatomical intricacy found in the print, and this would surely not be a change Mantegna himself would have made.

The only firm alternative proposal made concerning the authorship of the Bristol *Descent* is by Fletcher who suggests the Paduan Giulio Campagnola (c.1482-c.1515-18). Fletcher invites the reader to consider the Bristol *Descent* in terms of the Venetian taste for coloured copies of prints (although in this case not a literal colouring of an engraving), which were often executed by amateur artists or apprentices.<sup>144</sup> The existence of such paintings after works by Mantegna is proved by the description given by the Venetian patrician connoisseur, Marcantonio Michiel

---

<sup>140</sup> Michael Hirst, 'Mantegna. London and New York', 321.

<sup>141</sup> Kristen Lippincott, 'Review of the Andrea Mantegna Exhibition in London' from *Renaissance Studies*, vol.6, no.3-4, 1992, 428-33, 432.

<sup>142</sup> Letter from Sheena Stoddard in Bristol to Michael Hirst at the Courtauld Institute, London, 19<sup>th</sup> February 1993. Unpublished document from the curatorial file at the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum, see Appendix One.

<sup>143</sup> See footnote 3.

<sup>144</sup> Jennifer Fletcher, 'Mantegna and Venice', 20.

(1484-1552) in his *Notizie d'opere del disegno*.<sup>145</sup> Michiel records seeing small reproductions of Mantegna's Eremitani frescoes, which belonged to, and were probably executed, by Michiel Contarini, an amateur painter who specialised in copies of prints by Mantegna and Raphael.<sup>146</sup> A copy of the *Martyrdom of St Christopher* by Contarini still existed in 1829 in the collection of the Conte Cicognara. Additionally copies of the Eremitani frescoes, but not those by Contarini, exist in the Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris. Fletcher feels that the Bristol *Descent* is on a par with such copies and was produced purely to be an attractive painting after a famous artist to decorate the wall of Venetian home.

Fletcher's proposal that the copier was specifically Campagnola was supported by a letter of recommendation that his father, the lawyer Girolamo Campagnola, sent to Mantegna, with whom he was friends, in 1497 in the hope of gaining a position for his son at the court of the Gonzagas.<sup>147</sup> The letter praises Giulio Campagnola's accomplishments stating that he was equal to the painter and illuminator Jacometto (active in Venice between 1472 and 1497) and particularly good at imitating the style of Giovanni Bellini.<sup>148</sup> It is generally assumed that Girolamo succeeded in gaining this position for his son, as some of the engravings after Mantegna's *Triumphs* and *Pallas Expelling the Vices* are thought to be by Giulio's hand due to their mention by Pomponius Gauricus of 1504.<sup>149</sup> Campagnola may well have come into close contact with Mantegna at the court of Mantua and had access to his paintings, drawings and

---

<sup>145</sup> The text was written intermittently between 1521 and 1543, and is now preserved in the Biblioteca Marciana, Venice.

<sup>146</sup> Enrica Tietze-Conrat, *Mantegna: Paintings, Drawings, Engravings*, London, 1955, 201. Tietze-Conrat provides a translation of the description from Michiel: 'The above-mentioned Messer Michel [Contarini] has many little pictures from Mantegna, Raphael, and other masters' designs, cleverly colouring them in Jacometto's manner.'

Further information on the notes of Marcantonio Michiel can be found in the articles by Jennifer Fletcher; 'Marcantonio Michiel, 'che ha veduto assai'', *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 123, No. 943 (Oct., 1981), 602-609; and 'Marcantonio Michiel: His Friends and Collection', *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 123, No. 941 (Aug., 1981), 453-467.

<sup>147</sup> Ronald Lightbown, *Andrea Mantegna*, 53. A later letter sent from Girolamo Campagnola to Leonico Tomeo, praised the artistic talent of Mantegna. Although the original is lost Giorgio Vasari refers to it in his *Lives of the Artists* (Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, Penguin edition, translated by George Bull, Suffolk, 1971, 102).

<sup>148</sup> The extract from the letter reads: '*prima é venuto a tanta perfectione in picture che'l Belino no po' fa cossa si bella ache Julio non facci uno simile exemplo a l'exemplare*'. A. Luzio, 'Giulio Campagnola fanciullo prodigio', *Archivio storico dell'arte*, I, 1888, 184-5.

<sup>149</sup> Pomponius Gauricus, *De Sculptura*, 1504, ed. A. Chastek and R. Klein, Geneva, 1969, 101.

prints, but this would only have been for a short period as by 1499 he was in Ferrara working for the Este family.<sup>150</sup>

Fletcher's suggestion regarding the purpose and function of the Bristol *Descent* as a coloured version of Mantegna's print for a Venetian home seems entirely plausible. I do, however, question her opinion that the painting is just a copy by the young and inexperienced Campagnola or some other mechanical colourist. Campagnola would have been in his late teens or early twenties when in contact with Mantegna at the Gonzaga court, if indeed he were ever there. It seems highly unlikely that such a young artist would be capable of painting the Bristol *Descent* and yet be virtually unknown today, even despite the praise his father may have given him. If he had been capable of painting a work of the quality and detail of the Bristol *Descent* at such a young age, then his talent would surely have seen him produce later works of better quality than those that now exist. In my mind, the painter of the Bristol *Descent*, as I have consistently stated, was an accomplished and highly experienced artist in view of the work's masterly execution and the added symbolic details. The composition shows an artist exceptionally proficient in painting religious subjects and with an acute eye for precision, these being qualities not found in the work of the young and inexperienced Campagnola.

Works surviving by Campagnola are few in number with only around fifteen engravings ascribed to him with any certainty and a number of drawings also surviving that derive from the prints (although their authorship is unknown).<sup>151</sup> Whilst paintings by Campagnola are mentioned in Venetian collections in the 1530s by Michiel, none survive that are definitely by his hand.<sup>152</sup> When comparing the engravings by him with the Bristol painting, there are few, if any, similarities of style. For example Campagnola's engraving, *The Young Shepherd*, c.1510 (fig.30), shows a very much generalised landscape of graceful, simplified rocky terrain that lacks any of

---

<sup>150</sup> Suzanne Boorsch, 'Cat.118' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., edited by Jane Martineau, London, 1992, 377.

<sup>151</sup> Helen Langdon, 'Giulio Campagnola', *The Grove Dictionary of Art* edited by Jane Turner, vol.5, 534-5.

<sup>152</sup> In the National Gallery, Washington, a painting of *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* (c.1495/1500, tempera on panel, 301 x 181mm) after Mantegna's image of the same subject has been precariously ascribed to Giulio Campagnola. No explanation has been put forward for this reasoning and with the lack of any other painted works by the artist it is hard to prove either way without documentary evidence.

the minute detail found in the Bristol painting or even the modelled forms and strong lighting found in the original Mantegna print. This engraving is not an exception of Campagnola's, but typifies his style, which is also seen, for example in a pen and ink drawing at the Louvre (fig.31), *Landscape with Two Men Sitting near a Coppice* (after 1510) and the print of *The Rape of Ganymede*, ca. 1500–1505 (fig.32). Further evidence that the young Campagnola was not equal to painting the Bristol *Descent* is provided by the engravings made after Mantegna's *Triumphs* that are ascribed to him and do not vary from the original. There is none of the alteration or adaptation found in the Bristol image and, moreover, the prints clearly lack the talent of Mantegna's draughtsmanship and linear detail.<sup>153</sup> These engravings would have been made at the same time as Fletcher suggests for the Bristol painting, this being between 1497 and 1499, yet, there is little suggestion in them of the inventive mind or meticulous hand that was behind the Bristol painting.

Fletcher's suggestion of Campagnola as the artist of the Bristol painting follows an account in her essay of her viewing the painting unframed, and inspecting infra-red photographs of the work made when it was sent for examination to the National Gallery, London, in 1987. From observing the underdrawing and some visible *pentimenti* (above the upper part of the arch) she concluded along with Jill Dunkerton, who was also present, that the brush marks were 'too regular and mechanical' for it to be by Bellini.<sup>154</sup> This opinion was reached from comparing the painting physically alongside Bellini's *Blood of the Redeemer*, c.1460-5 (fig.33), owned by the National Gallery, which had an underdrawing with cross-hatching that was 'quite different'.<sup>155</sup>

The advantage of such close first-hand observation of the painting gives a certain authority to Fletcher's opinion. Nevertheless, there remain some flaws in her argument. Chief among these is the fact that the 'too regular and mechanical' brushstrokes of the underdrawing are surely only evidence that the composition was directly reproduced from Mantegna's fully worked-out design. Indeed, some scholars even suggested, before tests on the work's medium were carried out, that the paint was applied straight on top of a copy of the engraving due to the extensiveness and

<sup>153</sup> Suzanne Boorsch, 'Cat.118' and 'Cat.123' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., 377 and 387.

<sup>154</sup> Jennifer Fletcher, 'Mantegna and Venice', 20.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

detail of the partly visible underdrawing.<sup>156</sup> This misconception about the work is understandable when the support is taken into consideration since, as Susan Lambert observes, ‘during the Renaissance ink was often used on vellum, the effect being similar to that of engraving’.<sup>157</sup> For the artist of the Bristol *Descent* talent and thought was not needed in the execution of the underdrawing as the invention was already existent and only needed transferring to vellum. Instead, time and patience were required to copy the composition and the complex poses of the figures and forms accurately, and this accounts for the detail of the underdrawing and its ‘regular and mechanical’ appearance as well as suggesting that the purpose of the Paris drawing was as an intermediate preparatory work. The Paris drawing allowed even more for the accurate and ‘mechanical-like’ execution of the underdrawing in the Bristol painting. In addition, to compare the Bristol underdrawing to that of a painting by Bellini, whose composition was created by the artist and not taken from a highly finished graphic image by Mantegna’s accomplished hand, is unfair and unhelpful.

It can also be said that this task of transferring from print to vellum was made considerably easier by the clarity and definition that the printed medium of engraving allowed. Analysis of a detailed infra-red photograph (fig.34) of the Bristol painting showing the legs of the three figures to the right of Christ reveals faint, parallel lines of the underdrawing indicating areas of shading (particularly apparent on the thighs of the figure to the furthest right). The lucidity and precision of these lines compares favourably to those in the same position on the engraved print as well as the vellum drawing in Paris. This can be seen as strong evidence of how accurately the artist of the Bristol painting followed the corresponding lines of Mantegna’s print. A juxtaposition of another infra-red photograph of the painting detailing the archway directly behind the winged demon on the left (fig.35) with the corresponding part of the engraving, illustrates the point that although the underdrawing is very regular, a certain looseness of stroke can be observed when compared with the marks in the print. Indeed, for the painting the underdrawing may have been done by another,

---

<sup>156</sup> Conservation record of the painting made by Kate Lowry in June 1978. Unpublished document from the conservation file at the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum, see Appendix Three.

<sup>157</sup> Susan Lambert, *Drawing Technique & Purpose: an introduction to looking at drawings*, Rugby, 1984, 14. Kay Sutton pointed out that *The Entombment* ascribed to the ‘style of Adriaen Ysenbrandt at the National Gallery, London, is an example of a picture that is painted over an original engraving, which was by Martin Schongauer. Emailed correspondence with Kay Sutton, 9<sup>th</sup> June 2009, see Appendix Two.

lesser artist, such as a studio assistant, whilst the actual paintwork was undertaken by the master.

Comparison of the underdrawing of the Bristol painting with the draughtsmanship of the print and Paris drawing was a task not undertaken by Fletcher and Dunkerton. Fletcher is the first art historian to have such prime access to the infra-red photographs revealing previously unknown marks, whilst she also benefited from the in-depth knowledge of Dunkerton and an intimate examination of the painting without its frame. Yet, no mention is made of the other *Descent* compositions by Fletcher and, critically, how they compare. Neither has any scholar since the publication of Fletcher's essay questioned this research and engaged in a further examination, as Stoddard noted in her letter.<sup>158</sup> The comparison of the underdrawing with the engraving, however, seems to me to be a crucial undertaking in order to examine how closely the artist of the painting followed and relied upon Mantegna's drawn lines. This reliance on the underdrawing is perceived by the fact that the thinly applied paint closely followed the detailed lines of the underdrawing.<sup>159</sup>

In any case, the statement that the underdrawing is 'too regular and mechanical' to be by the hand of Bellini cannot hold sway in the debate over attribution. Highly instructive in this is the relationship between Mantegna's *The Presentation of the Christ Child in the Temple* of c.1454 (Staalich Museum, Berlin (fig.36)), and that by Giovanni Bellini of the late 1460s (Pinacoteca Querini Stampalia, Venice (fig.37)),<sup>160</sup> which used the composition of his brother-in-law but with additional figures either side of the original five. Reflectography carried out in 2000 on Bellini's painting revealed a detailed and precise underdrawing with very well defined cross-hatching,<sup>161</sup> comparable to the Bristol *Descent's* detailed underdrawing. Here, as with the

---

<sup>158</sup> Letter from Sheena Stoddard in Bristol to Michael Hirst at the Courtauld Institute, London, 19<sup>th</sup> February 1993. Unpublished document from the curatorial file at the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum, see Appendix One.

<sup>159</sup> Conservation record of the painting made by Tom Caley in April 1987. Unpublished document from the conservation file at the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum, see Appendix Three.

<sup>160</sup> Agreement on the date of the work's creation is the main subject of debate between scholars concerning the work. Goffen is one of very few critics who dispute the attribution of the Venice painting to Giovanni Bellini and instead calls it a copy of a now lost painting by Bellini. Goffen also asserts that the original conception of the subject was Bellini's and not Mantegna's invention, but this theory lacks evidence and has been rejected by all other scholars. Rona Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, 282.

<sup>161</sup> Information gained from the curatorial file on *The Presentation of Christ in the Temple* by Giovanni Bellini at the Pinacoteca Querini Stampalia, accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> September 2008.



Bristol painting, Bellini had an established and thoroughly completed composition for the *Presentation* by his brother-in-law from which to base his underdrawing on. The strong draughtsmanship of Mantegna allowed for the detail evident in the underdrawings of both these works and led to an application of paint, which rarely strayed from the drawn outline. Additionally incisions have been found in Bellini's *Presentation* indicating the possible use of some form of template.<sup>162</sup> Crucially the incisions are found only for the central part of the composition that relates to Mantegna's painting and this area also seems to have been painted in a slightly different technique.<sup>163</sup>

This information reveals that Bellini approached the painting of the *Presentation* in a different way to that of his own compositions. In fact, the various *pentimenti* revealed through an x-radiograph of Mantegna's *Presentation* are not found in Bellini's version, indicating that the alterations made by Mantegna when he painted over his own underdrawing were unknown to Bellini who worked solely from the completed painting.<sup>164</sup> The clear model that Mantegna's painting provided Bellini and the possible use of an intermediary template (most likely in the form of a drawing), indicate that it may have been an assistant who executed the underdrawing on which Bellini painted, and, as I have already argued, this could also be the case with the Bristol *Descent*. These recent discoveries in the Bellini *Presentation* have also led to a definite attribution of the work to Bellini where before some uncertainty remained.<sup>165</sup> In view of these findings Fletcher's argument is further weakened since the 'too regular and mechanical' underdrawing would tend to support an attribution to Bellini who had previously directly used a work by Mantegna to construct a highly specific underdrawing.

Although Bellini and Mantegna were working in separate areas at the time of the *Descent* compositions, Bellini could easily have acquired the print. Fletcher makes

---

<sup>162</sup> Jill Dunkerton, 'Bellini's Technique' in *The Cambridge Companion to Giovanni Bellini* edited by Peter Humfrey, 205.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 201-2.

<sup>164</sup> Andrea Rothe, 'Mantegna's Paintings in Distemper' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., edited by Jane Martineau, London, 1992, 82-3. Examples of *pentimenti* in Mantegna's *Presentation* include the positioning of the Virgin's face, the dress of the priest and perspective of the halos.

<sup>165</sup> Information gained from the curatorial file on *The Presentation of Christ in the Temple* by Giovanni Bellini at the Pinacoteca Querini Stampalia, accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> September 2008.

the point that an efficient and frequent postal service existed for the ninety mile stretch between Venice and Mantua,<sup>166</sup> whilst the close family connection between these two leading artists would most likely mean they often met. Additionally, motifs borrowed from other prints by Mantegna are found in the work of Giovanni Bellini, indicating that the *Descent* was not the only engraving by his brother-in-law that he was familiar with. For example, the soldier on the far left in Bellini's *Resurrection* (Staatliche Museen, Berlin) of 1475-79 (fig.38) is derived from the roman centurion in Mantegna's *Deposition* engraving of c.1465 (fig.39). The date of the Berlin *Resurrection* also falls into the same period as the Bristol *Descent* indicating Bellini's concurrent knowledge of Mantegna's compositions.

Bätschmann's key argument against the attribution to Bellini is that of the proportions of the figures and particularly those of the middle figure (this being either Abel or Adam) on the right. He comments that, 'it seems highly implausible that Bellini would have executed such an ill-proportioned nude' at such a late date (this according to the author being the 1470s).<sup>167</sup> Bätschmann is careful, however, not to fully dispute the attribution too far suggesting only that he thinks it 'unlikely' that Bellini executed the Bristol painting but giving no definitive reasons for this. Lippincott, however, goes as far as to call the central figure an awkward 'caricature' supports his opinion.<sup>168</sup> Though the central figure's somewhat squared rear does seem out of proportion it is only slightly exaggerated from the corresponding figure found in Mantegna's print and the Paris drawing. Additionally the lack of defining musculature in the Bristol painting means that its slenderness is more obvious to the viewer, as is the fact that this particular area of the figure is a darker flesh tone from their front and the thigh of the right-hand figure which it overlaps.

In reference to the elongation of the Bristol figures, to which Bätschmann also refers,<sup>169</sup> a survey of other nudes or semi-clothed standing figures by Bellini reveals that they are clearly comparable, not only in slenderness but also the modelling of form with colour. The *St Sebastian* (fig.40) from the *Polyptych of St Vincent Ferrer*

---

<sup>166</sup>Jennifer Fletcher, 'Mantegna and Venice', 17.

<sup>167</sup> Oskar Bätschmann, *Giovanni Bellini*, 50.

<sup>168</sup> Kristen Lippincott, 'Review of the Andrea Mantegna Exhibition in London' from *Renaissance Studies*, 432.

<sup>169</sup> Oskar Bätschmann, *Giovanni Bellini*, 50.

of c.1460-5 (SS. Giovanni e Paolo, Venice), *St Terence* (fig.41) from the predella of the *Pesaro Altarpiece* dating to the late-1470s (Museo Civico, Pesaro) and the figure of Christ in the National Gallery's *Blood of the Redeemer*, to name but a few. All have long, slender figures enhanced by a contrapposto pose very like that of the Bristol Eve.

This taste for long, elegant figures, which contrast to Mantegna's more robust and powerful personages, whose musculature is further enhanced by the starkness of their black and white colouring, is found continuously in the drawings of Jacopo Bellini that are in his two albums and seem to have been inherited by his son. Additionally, the figures of both father and son show the influence of the earlier art of Antonio Pisanello (c.1395-1455/6),<sup>170</sup> and Gentile da Fabriano (c.1370-1427), the latter was thought to have trained Jacopo.<sup>171</sup> Pisanello's drawing of *Six Nude Women* in Rotterdam (fig.42) is clearly comparable to Giovanni's rendering of the figure of Eve. The poised and harmonious curved forms of Gentile's figures are found in Jacopo's art helping to explain Giovanni's preference for longer figures from those of Mantegna's.

The drama of his sculptural-like white robes with their deep folds is a decisive contradiction to the nude figures either side. This helps to focus the viewer's attention to the centre of the composition where the action of the narrative is played out, whilst retaining the composition's tight plan and its symmetry provided by the nudes either side. Bellini, as a Venetian colourist, took a similar approach to painting figures, concentrating less on the figure's physical structure and depiction of anatomical features and more on creating a smooth, rounded form that is pleasing to the eye. This is seen in the nude figures by Bellini mentioned previously and to exemplar in his *Feast of the Gods* of 1514 (National Gallery, Washington D.C.) and *Lady at Her Toilet* of 1515 (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna).

An attractive Eve, as opposed to an aged one, also corresponds closely with Giovanni Bellini's conception of the female form. Even in images where Bellini shows an older

---

<sup>170</sup> Jacopo and Giovanni Bellini would have been well acquainted with the work of Pisanello who executed a series of frescoes in the Doge's Palace in Venice between 1415 and c.1420 (now all destroyed). Harold Osborne (ed.), 'Pisanello', from *The Oxford Companion to Art*, 876.

woman, such as the Virgin of the *Pietà* in the Accademia, Venice (fig.43), their figures remain graceful and their facial features soft, though a little worn. Indeed, the Eve of the Bristol painting conforms too many of Bellini's representations of women in religious works with bowed head cast to one side in a sign of humility and piety, a high forehead, small chin and hair framing the face. Examples of such women are found in the *Pietà* in the Vatican (fig.44), the *Sacra Conversazione* of the Accademia, Venice (fig.45), as well as many of his representations of the Virgin in images of the Madonna and Child (the framing hair replaced by a mantle). Furthermore, this specific facial type is found in the work of Gentile da Fabriano, such as the drawing entitled *Seated Woman* in Berlin (fig.46), as well as in the surviving paintings of Jacopo Bellini, for example the Virgin of *The Annunciation Altar* (San Alessandro, Brescia (fig.47)) and his *Madonna and Child* in the Louvre (fig.48).

One further argument against the attribution to Bellini is found in the 1993 letter from Stoddard to Hirst. Stoddard notes the fact that the sky of the Bristol *Descent* was painted in azurite and without clouds and states that this is in contrast to all the paintings by Giovanni Bellini at the National Gallery, London, which have 'ultramarine-type skies, always with clouds'.<sup>172</sup> She goes on to state that the sky of the Bristol painting has far more in common with those by Mantegna rather than being characteristic of Bellini. The specific comparison with works by Bellini only from the National Gallery is due to the Bristol painting undergoing examination there in 1987, the same examination which Fletcher reported from in her essay.<sup>173</sup> No written report survives of the discussion refereed to by Stoddard in the letter and the issue of the sky is not mentioned in any of the scholarly texts published since.<sup>174</sup> The specific works by Bellini with which the Bristol painting was compared at the National Gallery and even who was involved in this discussion is, therefore,

---

<sup>171</sup> Colin Eisler, *The Genius of Jacopo Bellini: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, 24.

<sup>172</sup> Letter from Sheena Stoddard in Bristol to Michael Hirst at the Courtauld Institute, London, 19<sup>th</sup> February 1993. Unpublished document from the curatorial file at the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum, see Appendix One.

<sup>173</sup> Jennifer Fletcher, 'Mantegna and Venice', 17-25. Fletcher does not comment on the depiction of the sky in order to further her argument against the painting being by Bellini. This may indicate that Fletcher was unaware of the discourse about the topic despite being present during some of the 1987 examination or felt that the evidence was too weak to use.

<sup>174</sup> Michael Hirst, 'Mantegna. London and New York', 321. Hirst refers also refers to this technical examination but only briefly and does not imply that he himself was present at the occasion stating only that Jill Dunkerton had closely observed the work and assessed its condition.

unknown. However, the observations made by Fletcher in her essay suggest that *The Blood of the Redeemer* was a likely candidate.

The number of paintings in the National Gallery that are autograph by Bellini and include areas of sky amount only to five, and these works vary greatly in date.<sup>175</sup> Such a limited comparison of paintings does not prove at all that the Bristol painting cannot be by Bellini on the basis that the depiction of sky is not ‘typical’ to the artist. The triangular patch of sky visible in the top right-hand corner of the Bristol painting is actually very small in size with the extension of the rocky outcrop made by the artist reducing the already narrow dimensions of the expanse of sky found in the printed version, which does not allow much space for to inclusion of clouds. Additionally, the foreshortened tale of the right-hand demon projects forcefully into this space and along with the bare branch restricts the opening further. To have included clouds would have crowded this area too much and not allow space to appreciate the inventiveness of the demon’s pose or clearly observe the symbology of the branch that I have previously discussed. Moreover, Mantegna’s engraved composition, although including a greater patch of sky, is also bare of clouds and makes the starkness of the subject and the bold draughtsmanship all the more emphatic to the viewer.

The bare sky of Mantegna’s engraving is actually rare when compared with the other prints by the artist from the same period. For example, the prints of the *Deposition*, *Flagellation* and various *Entombment* compositions<sup>176</sup> all include skies streaked with clouds. Although versions of the former two subjects exist without clouds these are unfinished and their completed compositions, generally considered to be by Giovanni Antonio da Bresica, include clouds. The artist of the Bristol painting is entirely reliant on the design of Mantegna and although small changes could be and were made clearly it was the intention of the artist not to compromise the strength of the composition and design. By extending the rocks in the Bristol painting much further

---

<sup>175</sup> The paintings are; *The Blood of the Redeemer*, c.1460-5, egg tempera on poplar, 470 x 343mm; *The Agony in the Garden*, c.1465, egg tempera on wood, 813 x 1270mm; *Saint Jerome Reading in a Landscape*, c.1480-5, egg tempera and oil on wood, 470 x 337mm; *Madonna of the Meadow*, c.1500, oil and egg tempera on synthetic panel transferred from wood, 673 x 864mm; and *The Assassination of Peter Martyr*, c.1507, egg tempera and oil on wood, 997 x 1651mm.

<sup>176</sup> See footnote 2 of the introduction.

out on the right the area of sky was halved in size. To fill this section then with clouds may have been a step.

Examination of paintings by Bellini that are of a similar size as the Bristol *Descent* and include compact patches of sky reveals that the artist did not usually clutter such small areas with clouds. The Washington *St Jerome* of c.1505 (fig.49), which at 490 x 390mm measures almost the same size as the Bristol painting (518 x 373mm), presents only a glimpse of sky, with the vast majority of it clear of clouds, as the rich landscape in front provides ample detail for the viewer. The relatively small *Madonna degli Alberti* (740 x 580mm) in the Accademia, Venice (fig.50), is another suitable comparison for the Bristol painting. The two areas of sky visible have a similar gradated tonality from dark upper to light lower as the Bristol *Descent* and, importantly, are dominated by other forms projecting into the space, in this case trees. As such Bellini has not compromised the clarity of the composition by also including clouds. Clearly the lack of clouds in the Bristol painting, therefore, cannot be indicative of the picture not being by Bellini.

The tonality of the sky in the Bristol painting, petering from a dark line of blue at the top though to a glimmer of light in the lower half, suggests a time of day being that of sunset or sunrise. A wider survey of Bellini's religious paintings (for example, figs 38, 50, 52 and 64) reveals a range of similar toned skies and shows the artist's favour for depicting these particular times of the day. This preference by Bellini for the first hours of the morning and the hours before dusk is because, as Tempestini explains, these hours 'invite one to meditation and induce a sense of melancholy' entirely appropriate for their devotional subject-matter.<sup>177</sup> This is, again, further evidence against the argument that the sky is not characteristic of those skies by Bellini.

The comment about the colouring of the sky in the Bristol painting being azurite rather than the 'ultramarine-type' commonly used by Bellini also loses some strength when the point is investigated a little further. Paul Hills and Jill Dunkerton both note that in the predella panels of *Pesaro Altarpiece* dated to the late 1470s, Bellini used

---

<sup>177</sup> Anchise Tempestini, *Giovanni Bellini*, 72.

‘azurite mixed with white lead’ in the sky.<sup>178</sup> This altarpiece, and in particular its predella panels, is considered by several critics, among them Byam Shaw<sup>179</sup> and Goffen,<sup>180</sup> to be close to dating and appearance of the Bristol painting. With this in mind the colouring of the sky in the Bristol painting is not so unique in the œuvre of Bellini and, therefore, a weak point of evidence for the work not to be by him. In addition, when viewing the infra-red photographs of the painting at the Bristol gallery, the conservator of paintings for the gallery, Carolyn Lamb, commented that she believed the sky may have been retouched as it appeared patchy in the infra-red photographs.<sup>181</sup>

In view of my investigations into the attribution of the Bristol *Descent* there are no valid reasons why the painting cannot and should not be given to Giovanni Bellini. I have also noted that if the painting underwent thorough cleaning so as to restore it closer to its original appearance, with the luminosity of colour re-established, then the attribution to Bellini would be even harder to fault.

As far as Bellini’s use of symbolic items such as plants, animals and objects in his paintings, particularly biblical scenes set in landscapes, this is well-documented and features throughout his career. Goffen remarks that Bellini’s deliberate construction of compositions around symbolic objects created ‘a new kind of devotional picture in which ‘the landscape setting is of utmost importance’ since it continually reminded the viewer of God’s presence in the world he created.<sup>182</sup> In one of his earliest known works dating from the early-1460s, *St Jerome in the Wilderness* (Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham (fig.51)), various details, such as a withered tree sprouting new shoots and a solitary rabbit, remind the viewer that a life spent in solitude, penitence and poverty renews and revives the soul. Again such symbology is found in Bellini’s later versions of *St Jerome* (National Gallery, London, c.1480-5 (fig.52); Uffizi, Florence, c.1480 (fig.53); and Washington). Whilst, Bellini’s *St Francis of the*

---

<sup>178</sup> Paul Hills, ‘Bellini’s Colour’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Giovanni Bellini* edited by Peter Humfrey, 82-94, 188.

Jill Dunkerton, ‘Bellini’s Technique’, 195-225, 208.

<sup>179</sup> J. Byam Shaw, ‘A Giovanni Bellini at Bristol’, 158.

<sup>180</sup> Rona Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, 284.

<sup>181</sup> Conversation with Carolyn Lamb on 14<sup>th</sup> November 2008 at the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum.

<sup>182</sup> Rona Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, 106.

*Desert of 1480* (Frick Collection, New York (fig.54)) illustrates, when compared with the depictions of St Jerome, that he was adapt to including iconographic details specific to the subject of the painting, in this case references to Franciscan literature and beliefs. Furthermore, it is not only the fig-tree previously referred to in Bellini's *Christ Crowded with Thorns* that has a symbolic association with Original Sin and Christ's Resurrection, since within the same composition is also found ivy and flowering plants that additionally support this connotation. As Augusto Gentili states about Bellini's landscapes, 'every single element has been predetermined in accordance with its symbolic function'.<sup>183</sup>

Gentili, like Goffen and Robertson in their respective monographs, is keen to point out that Bellini's landscapes are never simply empty settings for their subjects but play a key part in stressing the narrative and meaning of the work through symbolic forms. Indeed, Gentili describes it as almost inevitable that Bellini's landscapes 'should be suffused with the figures and concepts of Christian devotion'.<sup>184</sup> It can be supposed that Bellini saw this as necessary for emphasising the devotional content of the subject. With this in mind, the added vegetation and its significant meaning in the Bristol painting is undeniably comparable to the use of symbolic elements in Bellini's religious works set in landscapes. The keen perception to the plants' specific meaning and the deliberate positioning of this foliage in order to enforce the message, as found in the Bristol painting, is indicative of an artist wholly accustomed to its usage and inclusion.

As earlier referred to the fig tree in the Bristol painting has a number of symbolic meanings attached to it that reinforce the theological message of Christ's Descent into Limbo. Bellini would have been well versed in the multiple religious interpretations of the fig tree, as is indicated by his use of it in other paintings. It may be that the adoption of the fig tree for the Tree of Knowledge found in the sculptured relief on the Palazzo Ducale was perhaps what prompted Bellini to include it in the Bristol painting with the reference to the nudity of Adam and Eve. This symbology of the fig tree in the Bristol painting also becomes a point of intrigue when it is compared to the

---

<sup>183</sup> Augusto Gentili, 'Bellini and Landscape', translated by Peter Humfrey, from *The Cambridge Companion Guide to Giovanni Bellini* edited by Peter Humfrey, 167-81, 173.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.



drawings by Jacopo Bellini and his *Gattamelata* predella panel representing the *Descent*, which was most likely painted by Giovanni.<sup>185</sup> Here all the figures wear loincloths and no vegetation, symbolic or otherwise, is included. It is conceivable that the nude figures used by Mantegna combined with Bellini's growing knowledge of Christian symbolism led to the inevitable inclusion of a fig tree in the Bristol painting.

Like in those religious landscape paintings by Bellini, the 'added' elements of the Bristol *Descent*, including the numerous pebbles in the foreground, have been analysed in minute detail and rendered with unmatched dexterity, even if the poor condition of the work means that this cannot be fully appreciated. Furthermore, the warm, golden tones and treatment of light in Bellini's secure paintings is seen resolutely too in the Bristol *Descent*, despite being somewhat discoloured. Indeed without consideration of the symbolic meaning, the meticulously rendered plants in the Bristol Painting, executed with minute brushstrokes, are directly relatable to those plants found in Bellini's Naples *Transfiguration* of c.1487 (fig.55), the Frick *St Francis* and Uffizi, London and Washington *St Jerome*. The similarities are particularly apparent with the plants and weeds growing between the rocks in the foreground (fig.56) as almost identical species of plants that creep in the rocks below Christ in the *Transfiguration* (fig.57) as well as occupying the ground around the Washington and Uffizi *St Jeromes* (figs 58 and 59), and in the foreground of *St Francis* (fig.60). Moreover, the use of white to highlight the leaves of the foreground plants in the Bristol *Descent* (fig.61) is also seen in these paintings, such as the ivy and grasses in the Washington *St Jerome* (fig.62). The *cartellino* found in the Bristol *Descent* also has distinct parallels with the work of Bellini as such *cartellino* were a defining hallmark of his paintings throughout his career. Examples include the *Madonna and Child* in Pavia of c.1450-55, the Naples *Transfiguration*, the Frick *St Francis*, and featuring in more major pieces such as the *San Giobbe Altarpiece* (c.1487, Accademia, Venice) and his *Portrait of Doge Leonardo Loredan* (c.1501, National Gallery, London).

The clear similarity between the Bristol *Descent* and other paintings by Bellini of religious scenes set in landscapes also extends to the structuring and formation of

---

<sup>185</sup> See footnote 7 of the introduction.

rocks. Yet, such correspondence goes beyond mere stylistic similarities. There are two clear instances in the Bristol painting where there is an exact replication of the rock patterns found in secure works by Bellini. This makes the Bristol *Descent*'s connection with Bellini undeniable and, together with the other arguments I have put forward, makes it quite clear that only Bellini himself could have produced the painting.

Antonio Mazzotta was the first to notice that the rocks in the foreground of the Paris drawing (fig.64) precisely match with those beneath the Apostles in Bellini's Correr *Transfiguration* (fig.63 and 65).<sup>186</sup> This band of rocks, in the Bristol painting (fig.66), is repeated, although it is somewhat obscured by the added vegetation and use of colour, and it is one of the obvious elements altered from the print by Mantegna. The *Transfiguration* is considered by all scholars to be one of Bellini's earliest paintings<sup>187</sup> and few date it later than early-1460s.<sup>188</sup> Mauro Lucco, who attributes the Paris drawing to Mantegna, commented upon the indisputable connection between the drawing and *Transfiguration* in 2008.<sup>189</sup> He states that the Paris drawing must have been executed as early as 1465 in order for Bellini to have seen the work and used it in his Correr *Transfiguration* as well as the Bristol *Descent*.<sup>190</sup> Lucco's suggestion thus goes against all previous considerations for the dating of both the *Transfiguration* and Paris drawing. The latter, if attributed to Mantegna, was generally dated to c.1470,<sup>191</sup> a date, which matches the engraving and neatly links with the 1468 letter from Mantegna to Ludovico Gonzaga (noted in the introduction).

---

<sup>186</sup> Miriam Servi, 'Cat. 68' from *Mantegna 1431-1506*, exhib. cat., edited by Giovanni Agosti and Dominique Thiébaud, 198.

<sup>187</sup> The painting had been assigned to Mantegna due to a fake monogram 'AM' in the face of the rock at the right edge of the panel, but in 1871 J. A. Crowe and G. B. Cavalcaselle (*A History of Painting in North Italy*, London, 1912) correctly attributed it to Bellini and all later scholars have agreed with this. See Ancise Tempestini, *Giovanni Bellini*, 194-5.

<sup>188</sup> For example; Giles Robertson dates it to mid- or late 1450s (*Giovanni Bellini*, 31); Rona Goffen follows Robertson (*Giovanni Bellini*, 14); Anchise Tempestini to c.1460 (*Giovanni Bellini*, 195); Keith Christiansen places it between c.1459 and 1464 ('Bellini and Mantegna', 67); and Oskar Bätschmann to around 1460 (*Giovanni Bellini*, 41).

<sup>189</sup> Mauro Lucco, 'Cat. 6' from *Giovanni Bellini*, exhib. cat., edited by Mauro Lucco and Giovanni Carlo Federico Villa, Milan, 2008, 148-50, 148. The catalogue accompanied the *Giovanni Bellini* exhibition held at the Scuderie del Quirinale, Rome, between 30<sup>th</sup> September 2008 and 11<sup>th</sup> January 2009.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>191</sup> See David Ekserdjian, 'Cat. 66' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., 261 and 263.

In examining other early works by Bellini I myself have noticed that the band of rocks on the right-hand side of the *Transfiguration* is itself replicated in the middleground directly behind the cross in Bellini's *Crucifixion* (also in the Museo Correr (figs 67, 68 and 69)). Again this painting is considered by scholars to be an autograph early work by Bellini generally dated to c.1455.<sup>192</sup>

In contrast to the chronological proposition put forward by Lucco I would argue that the Correr *Transfiguration* and *Crucifixion* came before the Paris drawing and, therefore, the design of the foreground rocks is Bellini's. This conforms to the accepted dating of c.1460 that both the Correr paintings are given by scholars as well as repositioning the Paris drawing to a later period that is consistent with the dating of the *Descent* engraving. As such the argument that the Paris drawing is by Bellini and not Mantegna is considerably strengthened. It would appear that Bellini, not content with the foreground in the print, revisited previous compositions he had produced to find a suitable rock formation to use in his preparatory drawing to then incorporate into the painting. Indeed, the step of rocks in the *Transfiguration* creates a similar low-viewing point as that found in *Christ's Descent into Limbo*.

Similar bands or steps of rock in paintings by Bellini are also found, for instance, in two of the predella panels from the *St Vincent Ferrer* polyptych of c.1465, the *St George* panel of the Pesaro Altarpiece, and the National Gallery *St Jerome*. These examples illustrate such rocks to be a characteristic feature of Bellini's, strengthening the attribution to him of the Paris drawing. Indeed, Bellini's source of inspiration for these rocky steps was not Mantegna but rather his father and other artists working in and around Venice in the early fifteenth century. Landscape drawings from Jacopo's sketchbooks include very similar rock formation, for example the *Baptism of Christ* (fig.70) and the *Vision of Saint Eustace* (fig.71). Several of the panels from the *Passion Polyptych* of c.1430-35 (fig.72) by the Venetian artist Antonio Vivarini (c.1415-76/84) use comparable steps of rock, and this trait is also seen in paintings by Antonio's brother, Bartolomeo Vivarini (c.1432-c.1499), such as the *Triptych of St. Martin* in Bergamo (fig.73). Additionally, low bands of rocks are common features of paintings by Filippo Lippi (c.1406-69), for example the Prato *Adoration of the Child*

---

<sup>192</sup> Anchise Tempestini, *Giovanni Bellini*, 194.

*with Saints*, 1460-5 (fig.74), and the *St John Taking Leave of his Parents* of 1452-65 (fig.75) from his fresco cycle in the Duomo, Prato. Filippo Lippi is known to have been present in Padua for about two years from 1434<sup>193</sup> and Jacopo Bellini who often visited the city to undertake various commissions may easily have seen his work.<sup>194</sup>

A second example of an exact replication in the Bristol painting from a secure Bellini is seen in the rock layer directly above the entrance to Limbo. This carefully observed strip of rock is significantly different from the rusticated blocks of stone with deep recesses that Mantegna used for his print. The layered Bristol rocks have no precedence in the art of Mantegna and are clearly an invention of Bellini, because the strip (fig.76) is exactly the same as that projecting out over the saint in Bellini's Uffizi *St Jerome* (fig.77). In both works the rocks are positioned in a prominent part of the composition and the detail, design and careful colouration of them are identical. Whilst it cannot be ascertained which painting came before the other, indeed they are probably very close in date, it is clear that Bellini considered this particular stratification to be particularly well suited to a religious landscape. Similar examples of layered rocks in paintings by Bellini are seen in the Berlin *Resurrection*, Frick *St Francis*, the Prato *Crucifixion with Jewish Cemetery*, c.1505 (fig.78), and the London and Uffizi *St Jerome*.

Finally, even the facial profile above the central demon has close equivalents in Bellini's religious landscapes. In general, Bellini's anthropomorphic rocks are suggested by the position and projection of rocks themselves, just like in the Bristol *Descent*, rather than from cracks within a single stone, as in Mantegna's print. A similar 'face' is to be seen in Bellini's National Gallery *St Jerome*, situated on a level with the top of the book just to the left of a rock fissure crack. The rocky outcrop of the Uffizi *St Jerome* also has various anamorphic and suggestive features. The rock plinth on which St Jerome rests his book in the Washington version cunningly evokes the face of a lion, which parallels the lion seated behind the saint.

---

<sup>193</sup> Eliot W. Rowlands, 'Filippo Lippi and His Experience of Painting in the Veneto Region', *Artibus et Historiae*, vol. 10, no. 19, 1989, 53-83, 53.

<sup>194</sup> Colin Eisler, *The Genius of Jacopo Bellini*, 530-2.

The previously unnoticed connection between the rocks in the Uffizi *St Jerome* and Bristol *Descent* suggests a date for the latter picture again of the late-1470s to early-1480s, which places it within the same period as the former work. Such a date would also explain the Bristol painting's close similarities, in its rocks, vegetation, colouring, size, and detail, with the New York *St Francis*, the Naples *Transfiguration*, the Berlin *Resurrection* and the National Gallery *St Jerome*, which are all from this same period. This date is also several years after the early-1470s date given to Mantegna's engraving, allowing enough time for knowledge of the print to have been disseminated to Venice. My proposed dating is a little later than that originally suggested by Byam Shaw of 1473<sup>195</sup> which is also supported by Goffen,<sup>196</sup> although Fritz Heinemann put it earlier at 1470.<sup>197</sup> However, it conforms to the date given by other scholars, such as Robertson<sup>198</sup> and Ekserdjian,<sup>199</sup> who may have also recognised the similarities of the painting with known works by the artist. I also suggest a similar date for the Paris drawing, with Bellini producing it (or having it made) shortly before executing the underdrawing on the vellum for the painting. Bellini's use of vellum is also documented in his executing a now lost miniature portrait of Raffaele Zovenzori in 1474, implying that he was already familiar with the material before the producing the Bristol *Descent*.

The *Descent* compositions by Mantegna and Giovanni Bellini keenly reveal their individual talents that they were so lauded for in their lifetime. Mantegna's were those of invention and draughtsmanship, while Bellini's concerned his sublime use of colour and handling of paint. The musical instrument maker, Lorenzo da Pavia, who operated in Venice and was Isabella d'Este's most trusted art advisor, neatly sums up this contrast when, on 6<sup>th</sup> July 1504, he wrote to Isabella on the progress of a nativity painting (now lost), which she had commissioned from Bellini.<sup>200</sup> He commented that, 'it is true that in the area of invention [Bellini] cannot be compared to the most excellent Mantegna.'<sup>201</sup> In a second letter ten days later, he again referred to the talents of Mantegna in comparison to those of Bellini when stating that 'as I wrote

<sup>195</sup> J. Byam Shaw, 'A Giovanni Bellini at Bristol', 159.

<sup>196</sup> Rona Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, 282.

<sup>197</sup> Fritz Heinemann, *Giovanni Bellini e i Belliniani*, 2 vols., Venice, 1962.

<sup>198</sup> Giles Robertson, *Giovanni Bellini*, 25.

<sup>199</sup> David Ekserdjian, 'Cat. 69' from *Andrea Mantegna*, exhib. cat., 267.

<sup>200</sup> Jennifer Fletcher, 'Mantegna and Venice', 25.

<sup>201</sup> Keith Christiansen, 'Bellini and Mantegna', edited by Peter Humfrey, 49-50.

before, messer Andrea Mantegna cannot be equalled in the matter of invention in which he is most excellent - indeed the best – but Giovanni Bellini is excellent in colour’.<sup>202</sup>

This documented incident provides the kind of reasoning for Bellini’s appropriation of Mantegna’s *Descent* print. There could be no greater inventor of compositions in the North of Italy in the late-fifteenth century than Mantegna, but by the beginning of sixteenth-century, Bellini was firmly acknowledged as the greatest colourist of his age. In adopting Mantegna’s composition but adding his own skill in colour, Bellini was commandeering Mantegna’s draughtsmanship, but attempting to surpass Mantegna by giving the work colouration and added symbology. In reference to the letters of Lorenzo da Pavia, Christiansen concludes that ‘Mantegna’s supremacy in the matter of *invenzione* and Bellini’s mastery of *colore* takes us beyond the issue of influence to encompass artistic character and ambition’.<sup>203</sup> This statement, I believe, applies implicitly to how the Bristol painting should be viewed. The work is not a copy of a Mantegna original but a manifestation of the very different brilliance of two major artists. Mantegna’s sharp, strong black lines give way to an illuminated image of warm, earthy hues, with contours slightly blurred and harsh lines and edges softened by subtle modulations of tone. The Bristol painting exhibits, as Goffen observes, ‘Bellini’s painterly translation of Mantegna’s sculptural line’.<sup>204</sup> Furthermore, Bellini has made the image his own and entirely characteristic of his religious landscape pictures by the inclusion of symbolic forms, prominent rocks, and an atmosphere that promotes mediation.

---

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-50.

<sup>203</sup> Jennifer Fletcher, ‘Mantegna and Venice’, 25. Fletcher also references these letters and ventures to suggest that their content exhibits recognition of differences in the style of two great and related artists, and the origins of the *disegno* versus *colore* debate’.

<sup>204</sup> Rona Goffen, *Giovanni Bellini*, 284.

## Conclusion: Artistic Process and a Possible Patron

Through my thorough investigation into the Bristol *Descent* and related art works I can propose the possible process of production behind it. I believe that Bellini acquired an impression of Mantegna's engraved composition in the late-1470s to early-1480s and from this made a detailed drawing on vellum, this being the one in Paris. This drawing directly transferred elements of Mantegna's design, such as the groups of figures and winged demons, but Bellini made adjustments to some of them, notably Eve and the central demon, whilst also altering parts of the setting. The fact that the drawing is on vellum, highly worked and detailed in areas, may mean that the drawing was originally intended to be a finished composition perhaps to be painted on. However, the Paris drawing has incomplete areas that are defined only by outlines or even rubbed-out. This indicates that Bellini was not content with Mantegna's concept and decided to interpret it differently, yet had not yet reached a conclusion. The Paris drawing thus became a template for what is now the Bristol painting where the alterations to the figures and scenery were finalised and further significant forms were added, these being the various plant species and the book.

It is the symbology of the added details as well as the theology behind the subject that suggest that the patron of the Bristol *Descent* was an educated and religious individual well versed in theological symbolism and more than likely already aware of Mantegna's engraving and that he wanted his own, unique version. The small-scale of the painting and its intricate detail indicate that it was designed to be closely observed and it may have functioned as a portable devotional image. Moreover, the patron would need to be a wealthy individual to be able to afford a painting by the hand of Bellini who had become by the early-1480s an established and respected artist in Venice.

With this information I therefore propose that a possible patron for the Bristol *Descent* could have been Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga (1444-1483), son of Mantegna's patron Ludovico Gonzaga. Francesco became a cardinal in 1461 and in this role he spent

much of his time in Rome and Bologna where he was legate, only returning to his home of Mantua on a few occasions before his early death in 1483.<sup>205</sup> One of his longest visits to Mantua was from 1479 to 1480, a date which coincides with the period when I suggested Bellini produced the Bristol *Descent*. Additionally, information known about Francesco from surviving documents, including his will, an inventory and correspondence, makes him a very likely patron for the Bristol painting. As evident in the inventory of his belongings, Francesco was a keen collector of gems, cameos, coins, medals, crystal vases, books and particularly illuminated manuscripts.<sup>206</sup> His appreciation of illuminations may have prompted him to request a painting on vellum while his occupation as a cardinal involved a lot of travelling meaning that a small-scale portable painting would have been easier to transport. The theological symbolism of the subject and the additions made by Bellini would have been clearly understood by the Cardinal. His religious outlook is also apparent from the fact that he owned several devotional texts that described Christ's Descent into Limbo, showing that he would have been well acquainted with the subject and its theological implications.<sup>207</sup> Furthermore, following a detailed study of Francesco's will and inventory David Chambers makes the assessment that 'Francesco's roving acquisitiveness and sheer quantity of fine objects described in the inventory suggests that many objects were made to order'.<sup>208</sup> Francesco would have been well acquainted with Mantegna's art as the artist had been resident at the court of Mantua since 1460 and during this time Mantegna had painted Francesco's portrait on at least two occasions.<sup>209</sup> Additionally, a letter sent from Francesco to the artist reveals that the cardinal highly esteemed Mantegna's artistic taste when he invited him to Bologna to view his collection of cameos, statuettes, and other antiquities.<sup>210</sup> Although Francesco's patronage of the Bristol *Descent* has no solid evidence it is thus a very feasible suggestion given his learned theological outlook, his close connection with Mantua and Mantegna, and his keen interest in art, books and collecting.

---

<sup>205</sup> Chambers, David S., *A Renaissance Cardinal and His Worldly Goods: The Will and Inventory of Francesco Gonzaga (1444-1483)*, London, 1992, 1-3

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, 63. The inventory of 1483 lists around two hundred manuscript books.

<sup>207</sup> See chapter two, footnote 88.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>209</sup> The two portraits are; *Portrait of Francesco Gonzaga*, Museo e Gallerie Nazionali di Capodimonte, Naples, c.1462, tempera on wood; *Arrival of Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga* from the Camera degli Sposi, Palazzo Ducale, Mantua, 1471-74, walnut oil on plaster.

<sup>210</sup> Letter from Cardinal Francesco Gonzaga in Porreta, near Bologna, to Andrea Mantegna in Mantua, July 1472. Paul Kristeller, *Mantegna*, 1902, 527, doc.45.



Previous judgement of the Bristol *Descent* as ‘a copy’ after Mantegna has, in my mind, tainted the work and led to scholars not giving the painting and its creator the credit they deserve. Fletcher remarks that ‘a great and original painter like Giovanni Bellini is far too often portrayed as a passive recipient of the great man’s [Mantegna’s] influence’.<sup>211</sup> I believe I have shown that this misguided concept of the ‘passive Bellini’ is plainly at work on the Bristol painting. Through a more thorough examination of the painting, the materials used, its iconography, and the alterations made to a predetermined composition combined with knowledge of Bellini, and his works, I have presented the painting as embodying a clear strategy by Bellini for enlarging upon the work of his brother-in-law by applying to it his own, well-documented expertise.

---

<sup>211</sup> Jennifer Fletcher, ‘Mantegna and Venice’, 18.

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources and Unpublished Documents

- Alighieri, Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, translated by Mark Musa, Penguin Classics, Indiana, 2003
- Aquinas, St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, translated by R. T. A. Murphy, New York and London, 1964, vol.54, 3a.52
- Bishop, Phillipa, unpublished essay on *Christ's Descent into Limbo* at the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum (written between 1987 and 1992)
- Conservation file on *Christ's Descent into Limbo* at the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum
- Curatorial file on *Christ's Descent into Limbo* at the Bristol City Art Gallery and Museum
- Curatorial file on *The Presentation of Christ in the Temple* by Giovanni Bellini at the Pinacoteca Querini Stampalia
- Gauricus, Pomponius, *De Sculptura*, translated by Chastek, A. and Klein, R., Geneva, 1969
- James, M. R., 'The Gospel of Nicodemus or Acts of Pilate' from *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford, 1924
- Juvenal, *Satire X*, translation by Peter Green, London, 1998
- Kristeller, Paul, 'Appendix of Documents', *Mantegna*, Berlin and Leipzig, 1902
- Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, Book IX, Chapter XXXIII, translation by W.H.S. Jones, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1918
- Pliny the Elder, *The History of Nature*, Book XVI, Chapter LXII, translation by John Bostock, London, 1855
- Storer, Jill, *The Anastasis in Byzantine Iconography*, unpublished M. Litt dissertation, University of Birmingham, 1986
- The Holy Bible*, authorized King James Version, published by Eyre and Spottiswoode, London
- Vasari, George, *Lives of the Artists*, Penguin edition, translated by George Bull, Suffolk, 1971

Voragine, Jacobus de, *The Golden Legend*, English edition by William Caxton, edited by F. S. Ellis, London, 1931

Worthen, Thomas Fletcher, *The Harrowing of Hell in the Art of the Italian Renaissance*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1981

### Books: Secondary Sources

Ames-Lewis, Francis (ed.), *Mantegna and 15<sup>th</sup>-century Court Culture*, London, 1992

Balaci, Alexander, *Mantegna*, London, 1980

Bätschmann, Oskar, *Giovanni Bellini*, London, 2008

Berenson, Bernard, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance, Venetian School*, London, 1957

Camesasca, Ettore, *Mantegna*, translated by Susan Madocks Lister, Milan, 1992

Carr, Dawson W., *Andrea Mantegna: The Adoration of the Magi*, California, 1997

Chambers, David S., *A Renaissance Cardinal and his Worldly Goods: the Will and Inventory of Francesco Gonzaga (1444-1483)*, London, 1992

Chambers, David S., *The Imperial Age of Venice, 1380-1580*, London, 1970

Cipriani, Renata, *All the Paintings of Mantegna*, Parts 1 and 2, translated by Paul Colacicchi, Norwich, 1963

Crowe, J. A. and Cavalceselle, G. B., *A History of Painting in North Italy*, London, 1912

Cruttwell, Maud, *Andrea Mantegna*, London, 1901

Davidson, Clifford and Seller, Thomas H. (eds), *The Iconography of Hell*, Michigan, 1992

Dunkerton, Jill (ed.), *Giotto to Dürer: Early Renaissance Painting in the National Gallery*, London, 1991

Eisler, Colin, *The Genius of Jacopo Bellini: The Complete Paintings and Drawings*, New York, 1989

Elliot, J. K. (ed.), *The Apocryphal Jesus: Legends of the Early Church*, New York, 1996

Ferguson, George, *Signs & Symbols in Christian Art*, New York, 1961

Fortini-Brown, Patricia, *The Renaissance in Venice: A World Apart*, London, 1997

Garavaglia, Niny, *The Complete Paintings by Mantegna*, New York, 1971

- Goffen, Rona, *Giovanni Bellini*, New Haven and London, 1989
- Hall, James (ed.), *The Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, Cambridge, 1996
- Harris, Richard, *The Passion in Art*, Bournemouth, 2004
- Heinemann, Fritz, *Giovanni Bellini e i Belliniani*, 2 vols., Venice, 1962
- Hendy, Philip and Goldscheider, Ludwig, *Giovanni Bellini*, Oxford, 1945
- Henry, Matthew, *Concise Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Tennessee, 1997
- Hultgren, Arland J., *The Parables of Jesus: A Commentary*, Michigan, 2002
- Humfrey, Peter (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Giovanni Bellini*, New York, 2008
- Hughes, Robert, *Heaven and Hell in Western Art*, London, 1968
- Impelluso, Lucia, *Nature and Its Symbols*, translated by Stephen Sartarelli, Hong Kong, 2004
- Izydorczyk, Zbigniew (ed), *The Medieval Gospel of Nicodemus: Texts, Intertexts, and Contexts in Western Europe*, Arizona, 1997
- H. W. Janson, 'The Image made by Chance', Meiss, M. (ed.), *De artibus opuscula XL: Essays in Honour of Erwin Panofsky*, New York, 1961, 254-66
- Kren, Thomas and McKendrick, Scot, *The Renaissance: The Triumph of Flemish Manuscript Painting in Europe*, Los Angeles, 2003
- Kristeller, Paul, *Mantegna*, London, 1901
- Kristeller, Paul, *Mantegna*, Berlin and Leipzig, 1902
- Lambert, Susan, *Drawing Technique & Purpose: an introduction to looking at drawings*, Rugby, 1984
- Landau, David and Parshall, Peter, *The Renaissance Print: 1470-1550*, Yale, 1994
- Lightbown, Ronald, *Mantegna*, Oxford, 1986
- MacCulloch, J. A., *The Harrowing of Hell: A Comparative Study of an Early Christian Doctrine*, Edinburgh, 1930
- Manca, Joseph, *Andrea Mantegna and the Italian Renaissance*, New York, 2006
- Olivari, Mariolina, *Giovanni Bellini*, translated by Anthony Brierley, Milan, 2007
- Osborne, Harold, *The Oxford Companion to Art*, Bath, 1997
- Quinn, D., Rohling, J. H. and Verdier, P., 'Descent of Christ into Hell', *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. IV, Washington, 1989, 788-93
- Reed, R., *Ancient Skins, Parchments and Leathers*, London, 1972
- Richards, Lawrence O., *Bible Teacher's Commentary*, Colorado, 2002
- Robertson, Giles, *Giovanni Bellini*, Oxford, 1968

- Sill, Gertrude Grace, *A Handbook of Symbols in Christian Art*, New York, 1975
- Smith, Alistair, *Andrea Mantegna and Giovanni Bellini: Themes and Painters in the National Gallery, Number 12*, Banbury, 1979
- Speake, Jennifer (ed), *The Dent Dictionary of Symbols in Christian Art*, London, 1994
- Tempestini, Anchise, *Giovanni Bellini*, translated by Alexandra Bonfante, Milan, 1999, 65 and 68
- Tietze-Conrat, Erica, *Andrea Mantegna*, London, 1955
- Tietze, H. and Tietze-Conrat, Erica, *Drawings of the Venetian Painters*, New York, 1944
- Turner, Jane (ed.), *Grove Dictionary of Art*, 34 volumes, London, 1996
- Wilde, Johannes, *Venetian Art from Bellini to Titian*, Oxford, 1974

## Articles

- Byam Shaw, J., 'A Further Note on the Bristol Bellini', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol.94, no.593, Aug. 1952, 236-7
- Byam Shaw, J., 'A Giovanni Bellini at Bristol', *The Burlington Magazine*, no. 591, vol. XCIV, June 1952, 157-9
- Fletcher, Jennifer, 'Marcantonio Michiel, 'che ha veduto assai'', *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 123, no. 943, Oct., 1981, 602-609
- Fletcher, Jennifer, 'Marcantonio Michiel: His Friends and Collection', *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol. 123, no. 941, Aug., 1981, 453-467
- Goldner, George R., 'Review: Andrea Mantegna [Exhibition Catalogue] by Jane Martineau', *Master Drawings*, vol. 31, no. 2, summer 1993, 172-6
- Hirst, Michael, 'Mantegna. London and New York', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 134, no. 1070, May, 1992, 318-321
- Joost-Gaugier, 'A Pair of Miniatures by a Panel Painter: The Earliest Works of Giovanni Bellini?', *Paragone*, XXX, 375, 1979, 48-71
- Lippincott, Kristen, 'Review of the Andrea Mantegna Exhibition in London' from *Renaissance Studies*, vol.6, no.3-4, 1992, 428-33
- Loofs, Friedrich, 'Christ's Descent into Hell' from *Transactions of the Third International Congress for the History of Religions*, edited by P. S. Allen, vol. II, Oxford, 1908, 290-301

Rowlands, Eliot W., 'Filippo Lippi and His Experience of Painting in the Veneto Region', *Artibus et Historiae*, vol. 10, no. 19, 1989, 53-83

### Catalogues

Agosti, Giovanni and Thiébaud, Dominique (eds), *Mantegna 1431-1506*, exhibition catalogue, Louvre, Paris, France, 2008

Chambers, David S. and Martineau, Jane, *Splendours of the Gonzaga*, exhibition catalogue, London, National Gallery, London, 1981

Davies, Martin, *National Gallery Catalogues: The Early Italian Schools*, London, revised and reprinted edition of 1951 original, 1986

Lucco, Mauro, and Villa, Giovanni Carlo Federico (eds), *Giovanni Bellini*, exhibition catalogue, Scuderie del Quirinale, Rome, Milan, 2008

Martineau, Jane (ed.), *Andrea Mantegna*, exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy of Art, London, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Italy, 1992

Martineau, Jane and Hope, Charles (eds), *The Genius of Venice*, exhibition catalogue, The Royal Academy of Art, London, 1983

Paccagnini, G., Mezzetti, A. and Foglioli, M. (eds), *Andrea Mantegna*, exhibition catalogue, Mantua, 1961

Signorini, Rodolfo (ed.), *A Casa di Andrea Mantegna: Cultura artistica a Mantova nel Quattrocento*, exhibition catalogue, Milan, 2006

The Illustrations and Appendix are not available in the digital version of this thesis